

JESS & CO



BY J.J.B. AUTHOR OF
"WEE MACGREGOR"

NCG

Bell, John J.

7500

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“‘Jist the hauf o’ that,’ said Mr. Ogilvy modestly.”—PAGE 84



Jess & Co

by J. J. B.

Author of
"Wee Macgregor"

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by
H. Boyd.

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To My Mother

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I

ROSES AND RUE

DAVID HOUSTON, joiner and glazier by trade, gardener by nature, stood slackly in the July afternoon sunshine, admiring the “glory” roses that budded or bloomed on the south gable of his cottage. With lazy, loving eyes he gazed at them; and now and then he drew a puff from the briar pipe in the corner of his mouth and slowly emitted a thin stream of smoke with something like a sigh of contentment. Thrice, with an effort, he had moved away, and thrice he had retraced his few steps and returned to the roses.

The sound of a door opening caused him to start, and he grew red in the face as his wife, bearing a bundle of “washing” to be bleached, came round the corner of the cottage.

“Oh, David!” she exclaimed—she usually called him “Davie”—“you’ve surely forgot the time! It’s after three.”

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“Is it, Jess?” he said with genuine enough surprise in his voice, adding feebly, “I didna think it was that late.”

His wife of two months regarded him with grave eyes, and shook her head. “I thought,” she said, after a short pause, “I thought you had gone back to the shop an hour ago at least. You said you were going.”

“Ay. But come an’ see the roses, Jess.”

“I’ll see them at the right time—when your work’s by for the day, David,” she replied seriously.

“Och, lass, ye needna be that strict wi’ yer man,” he retorted good-humouredly. “There’s naethin’ daein’ at the shop this weather. Here, Jess, did ye ever see a bonnier——”

“There’ll never be anything doing at the shop unless the master’s there,” said Mrs. Houston firmly. “It’s not right, David.”

“But Angus is there.”

“Angus! and what can Angus do?”

“Weel, he’s no’ fit for muckle wark, but—but he can tak’ orders.”

“And forget them.”

“Puir buddy, he’s gettin’ auld,” said David gently.

“That’s just all the more reason why you should be looking after things for yourself. Oh, Davie, Davie, I doubt you’re too easy-going!”



“Come an’ see the roses, Jess,”—PAGE 10



“A short chuckle sounded behind her.”—PAGE 12

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Her husband looked uncomfortable, for he felt the truth of her remark, though as a matter of fact he was not more easy-going than the majority of the other tradesmen of little Kinloch-an-by-the-sea.

Mrs. Houston broke the awkward silence, speaking more lightly than she felt. "Off you go!" she cried, laughing, "off you go this minute, Davie lad, or I'll have to start the joiner-ing myself!"

His pipe had gone out, and he slipped it into his jacket pocket. "Ye see, lass," he said apologetically, "the Ardmartin show is on Seturday, an' I canna but think o' the roses."

"Yes, I know, Davie," she returned with quick sympathy. "You're not to think I don't care about your roses—but—but——"

"I'm a lazy, stupid fella!" he interrupted. "I'll awa' to ma wark." And he hurried off as if from temptation.

He turned at the garden gate and waved his hand to her, and she waved hers to him, smiling. But as soon as he disappeared her young face grew thoughtful, and she sighed as she started to spread the articles of her washing on the green. When she had laid out the last of the bundle she rose erect, stretching out her arms and forcing back her shoulders, for she was tired and stiff with the day's work, which

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had begun between five and six o'clock in the morning.

A short chuckle sounded behind her.

"Aunt Wallace!" she cried, turning and endeavouring to smile a cheerful welcome.

"Ye're learnin', wumman, ye're learnin'," observed her relative, staring at the white-patched green. "Nae doot ye'll dae better next time," she added, bending her middle-aged but still active body to examine at close quarters a specimen of her niece's washing. "An' hoo's yer guidman?" she inquired, rising at last from an inspection so lengthy, so keen, and so patronizing, that the young woman could scarcely restrain her temper.

"He's quite well, thank you, aunt," she replied, controlling herself.

Mrs. Wallace smiled quizzingly. "I thocht he micht be no' vera weel seein' that he needs aboot three 'oors to tak' his dinner in."

"Did you meet him on the road?"

"I seen him. But he never let on he seen me."

"Perhaps I—I kept him a little late to-day," said Jess.

"Ye micht ken better nor dae that, Jess. He's lazy enough wi'oot *you* keepin' him. But his fayther, pur man, wis jist the same. It bates me to ken hoo the business hauds the-

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gither! I never seen his mither—she wis deid afore I cam' to Kinlochan—but I've heard she had a sair time wi' her lazy man. Ay! an' I doot it's yersel' 'll be ha'ein' a——”

“Come into the house, and I'll make you a cup of tea, aunt,” said Jess hastily. “You've had a warm walk.”

Mrs. Wallace lived in a cottage about a mile distant, to which she had retired, on a small annuity, on the death of her husband some ten years ago. But she was Glasgow born and bred, and had never got into complete sympathy with the Kinlochan natives and their ways. It was during the not infrequent visits to her aunt, however, that Jess had come to know David Houston, and although the older woman was fond of holding up the man's obvious faults to the younger, she had never actually attempted to interfere with the course of true love. “Efter a', he's a dacent lad,” she would say to herself, “an' maybe Jess 'll mak' a man o' him. There's naethin' peely-wally aboot him onywey.”

Mrs. Houston conducted her aunt indoors and into the parlour with the old-fashioned furniture of her husband's parents, relieved by the modern daintinesses which she had provided just before and since her marriage, and by the flowers which the garden, small though it was, generously afforded.

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“Ye’re the yin for falderals,” observed Mrs. Wallace, with a critical stare round the room. “Ye’re like yer mither wi’ yer e’e for useless things an’ yer fine wey o’ speakin’. That’s the warst o’ a lassie takin’ a man’s job in an office, an’ gaun oot at nicht to clesses. Mphm! But every lass nooadays is a young leddy, an’ ower fine for the things that wis guid enough for her fayther an’ mither. ’Deed, ye sud ha’e mairrit yin o’ thon fancy chaps that dae naethin’ but pu’ doon their cuffs an’ dance aboot the big drapers’ places in Glesca. Yin o’ thon chaps wud shairly please ye better nor a plain jiner.”

Jess, having heard all this before, laughed good-naturedly, and left the room to prepare tea.

When she returned with the neatly spread tray, her aunt was still in her critical humour.

“I suppose ye ca’ this efternune tea!” she said with a sniff. “I’m extremely vexed I didna bring ma veesitin’ cairds wi’ me, yer ladyship! But I left them in ma cairrage.”

“You can send the footman up afterwards,” retorted Jess calmly, as she poured out the tea.

“Ye’re ower smairt, wumman,” said Mrs. Wallace with her short chuckle. “Weel, weel, seein’ ye’ve made the tea, I suppose I’ll ha’e to tak’ it.” And she took it with considerable relish.



“I suppose ye ca’ this efternune tea!”—PAGE 14



“David in his oilskins set out with a neighbouring gardener.”—PAGE 31

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“An’ hoo dae ye like keepin’ a hoose efter keepin’ books ?” she inquired presently. “It’s a change for ye. Eh ?”

“Yes,” said her niece softly. “Of course I like it, aunt,” she added somewhat sharply.

“Mphm! They a’ say that at the stairt. Yer hauns ’ll no’ be as genteel-like as they wis in the office.”

“I don’t mind that,” said Jess, not absolutely truthfully.

“Ye canna rub an’ scrub an’ dae yer ain washin’ an’ keep yer hauns like a doochess’s. Whit wey did Davie no’ get some puir buddy to dae the bit washin’ for ye ?”

“He wanted to, but I wouldn’t let him. I can manage it fine myself. It isn’t such a big job, you know.”

“Weel, I’m shair I’m gled ye’re pleased. Thenk ye : jist hauf-a-cup. But I doot ye’re daein’ mair nor yer share. Ye’re daein’ mair nor yer man to keep the hoose gaun.”

“Oh, no, Aunt Wallace ; Davie works very hard.”

“Ay — when he yinst gets stairtit,” said Mrs. Wallace, shutting her mouth with a snap. “He’s jist like a’ the ither men in Kinlochan——”

“He’s not !”

“Haud yer tongue ! I’ve leaved here ten year come Martinmas, an’ I ken whit I’m talkin’

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about. Gi'e a Kinlochan man a job to dae, an' if he's his ain maister—like yer man—he'll footer about an' footer about till he *has* to dae 't, or loss it a'thegither. Ay; an' mony a job here's been lost a'thegither! Whisht! I'm no' feenished yet. I grant ye, the job's dune quick an' weel when yinst it's stairtit—but mercy me! it's got to wait for that! Did I ever tell ye about auld Maister Macdonald's gate? Na, I didna. Weel, it's a parable for the guidwife o' ony Kinlochan man—especially if he's a jiner—an' there's jist the yin jiner in Kinlochan the noo—mind I'm sayin' *the noo*—for I'm thinkin' there's room for anither, if he's got ony spunk ava', in the future. . . . Och, ye needna flee up! Weel, auld Maister Macdonald bided in the big hoose next to ma wee yin, an' he wis a rale kind auld man, an' mony's the basket o' frit I had frae his gairden, for naethin'. Weel, it wisna lang efter I cam' to Kinlochan that his gate gaed wrang—it wis auld like hissel'—an' needit repairin'. So he sent for the jiner—it was Davie's fayther—an' efter twa-three weeks the jiner cam' an' lukit at the gate, an' said he wud get it repaired wi'oot delay. But the time gaed by an' the jiner never cam', an' the gate got waur an' waur. Maister Macdonald sent for the jiner again, an' the jiner cam'—no' in a hurry, ye ken—an' said he wud sort it wi'oot delay. An' then about

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sax month gaed by, Maister Macdonald writin' to the jiner or ca'in' at his shop, an' the jiner aye sayin' he wud sort the gate wi'oot delay. I mind fine auld Maister Macdonald speakin' to me ower the wa', an' me speirin' efter his health, for I thocht he wis lukin' frail, an' him sayin', 'Deed, Mistress Wallace, I'm no' feelin' whit ye wud ca' extra herty, but a creakin' door hings a lang while.' That wis in the simmer, an' a wee while efter the New Year he dee'd in his sleep, in an awfu' stormy nicht; an' when I gaed oot i' the mornin'—no' kennin' he wis deid—I seen the gate lyin' across the road an' Davie's fayther comin' alang the road, whustlin', wi' his bag o' tools. He didna loss the job, but he never had the face to sen' in the accoont. I dinna think he ever said onythin' to David aboot it, so ye can tell him the story when he's no' ower busy. Ha! ha!"

"I'm sure I'll do nothing of the sort," cried Jess indignantly. "A story like that is always exaggerated."

"That's ower big a word for an auld wife like me, lassie. But every word I've tell't ye 's as true as I'm sittin' here. An' efter a', when ye get to ken the Kinlochan folk ye'll no' wunner at onythin'. I cud tell ye hoo Sandy Stewart the penter tuk twa year to come to whitewash Mistress Dowie's washin'-hoose, an' then near gaed daft when he seen her laddie had dune it

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hissel'. An' I cud tell ye—na ! I'll no' say ony mair. But mind, Jess, an' keep yer man's nose on the grindstane. He's ower fond o' growin' roses an' pansies—a' vera fine in their wey, I grant ye—but no' the kin' o' things that'll gi'e ye saut to yer kail. Na, na ; ye maun luk efter yer man. Business afore pleasure, as the wice wumman said when she skelpit her wean afore gi'ein' it gundy. I'll jist tak' anither moothfu' o' tea. I hope ye can bile tatties as weel as ye mak' tea. Haud yer tongue ! I wudna tak' yer tea if I didna like it."

Her niece burst out laughing, for she was not afraid of the old lady, though some of the latter's remarks—not any of those about herself—had made her hot with anger. "I'll tell Davie all you've said, Aunt Wallace," she said presently, with assumed gravity.

"Vera likely ! Wait till ye've been mairrit a year or twa afore ye tell yer man whit ither folk say aboot him. Maybe by that time, I'll ha'e somethin' guid to say. But it depends on yersel', Jess, ma lass. Whitever ye dae or say, keep him awa' frae the roses an' pansies. Weel, it's time I wis aff. I've twa ludgers comin' the morn—they ca' theirsels peyin' guests—did ye ever !—so I'll maybe no' see ye for a whiley. Ma respec's to yer guid-man, an' ye micht tell him I'm needin' a new lock on ma coal-cellar door, but there's nae hurry

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for twa-three year. Guid-bye to ye, ma dearie.” And Mrs. Wallace kissed her niece quite affectionately, if hurriedly, and made for the door.

Jess accompanied her to the garden gate, watched her along the road, and then slowly retraced her steps to the cottage. Instead, however, of entering the house at once, she went round to the south gable and spent a couple of minutes lingering beside the roses. All her life she had loved flowers, but at a distance—loved them without understanding them as her husband did—and just before her marriage, fagged with the effort of a city existence, she had dreamed and told herself how beautiful and peaceful it would be in the little garden by the sea with the man of her choice. And how heavily upon her mind lay the conviction that it was her duty to discourage him in his flower-growing, and to persuade him, or even force him, to regard his business as paramount.

Her aunt’s allegations and insinuations, she realized, were based on truth. Jess had seen things for herself since she settled in Kinlochan, although she had at first shut her eyes to the easy-going ways of David, or excused them to herself in a sweet, illogical fashion. She was further aware that her husband—*he* felt neither shame nor anxiety in the fact—had never saved a penny. When money was necessary he would render accounts to

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the people who he thought could pay them, and send old Angus round a day or two later to collect what he could. If his financial affairs were not managed according to the best business methods, they were at least managed simply. He merely asked his own from Peter and gave it to Paul, when the latter asked *his* own. David Houston had never had any friction with debtor or creditor, and perhaps that was one reason why he had never noticed that a deal of his substance had been frittered away. If his books had been a hundredth part as carefully kept and watched over as his roses and pansies, his wife need never have worried her pretty head; but as it was, she had even more reason to do so than she knew. In the ledger of one of the big city wood-merchants with whom David Houston dealt, the word "caution" was pencilled against his name, and an agent's report in red ink read :—"Decent, sober young man, but lazy, and business going steadily back, through sheer neglect."

When David strolled into the cottage shortly after five o'clock that evening, he found his wife busy ironing in the kitchen.

"Surely it's not six yet, Davie," she said, smiling at him. "But I'll get your tea at once. You'll have to take it in the parlour to-night; this table's engaged."

"Och, there's nae hurry, lass," he said,

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sitting down in the plain wood armchair and lighting his pipe.

“Anything doing at the shop to-day?” asked Jess, folding a handkerchief and passing the iron over it.

Davie hesitated, and choked slightly on a puff of smoke. “Weel, ye see, I was jist gaun into the shop efter I left ye, when I met Sir Airchibald’s gairdener, an’ he wud ha’e me to gang up to the castle an’ see Sir Airchibald’s new orchids. He’s got some rare yins—forty pound a-piece, some o’ them—an’ the time gaed by when we was crackin’ thegither, an’ then I didna think it was worth while gaun back to the shop. So I jist cam’ hame, Jess.”

Jess picked up a limp handkerchief, spread it on the board, and smoothed it methodically; then folded it and ironed it, and laid it aside.

“I wish ye seen the orchids, lass,” David continued, smoking contemplatively. “I dinna think I wud ever gae daft aboot orchids, but they’re wunnerfu’ things. Ye’ll ha’e seen some in the Botanic Gairdens in the toon, I suppose, but they wudna be onythin’ to Sir Airchibald’s.”

He paused, but still his wife made no remark.

“Ye had yer aunt Wallace here the day! John tell’t me he seen her gaun in the gate.” John was the postman.

“Yes,” said Jess, in a strained voice, though she strove to speak naturally.

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“What’s ado?” he asked suddenly.

His wife said nothing, and went on with her ironing.

He got up and went beside her. “What’s vexin’ ye?” he inquired, with great gentleness.

She kept silence, setting the iron on the stand.

“Jess, what’s vexin’ ye?” he repeated.

“I—I’m tired,” she said at last.

“Tired—an’ it’s nae wunner, puir lass. Ye’ve had a lang day. What wey did ye no’ get Mistress McGuffie in to dae yer washin’? Ye’re no’ used to coorse wark, Jess.”

“I like it—I want to learn,” she said bravely, soothed a little by his solicitude for her. “But I think I’ll stop now and get the tea ready. Will you bring in some coals, Davie?” She wanted him away for a minute.

“Ay,” said Davie readily, and picking up the bucket from the side of the hearth, went off on his errand.

On his return he found her moving about briskly, preparing the evening meal.

“Can I dae onythin’?” he asked, looking at her. “I’m vexed ye’re tired, Jess.”

“Oh, I’m all right now, Davie,” she said, cheerfully. “I’ll be ready for you in five minutes.”

He appeared pleased to see her herself again. “Weel, I’ll get oot yer road till ye’re ready,”

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he said. "I'll ha'e a dauner roon the gairden."

When she went to the door to call him, he was bending affectionately over a clump of pansies. Looking up with a laugh, he cried: "If I dinna get a first prize on Seturday, I'll——"

"Come, Davie," she interrupted.

"Ye'd like me to get a first prize, wud ye no', dearie?" he asked, as he followed her into the parlour.

"Of course," she promptly replied. "But——" and halted.

"But ye think I dinna deserve it? Eh?"

"I'm sure you do deserve it," she said, feeling useless. She had meant to be so stern.

"I wunner what I'll buy ye, if I get the first prize," he said, gazing at her admiringly as she poured out his tea. "Ye deserve braw things," he added, a little shyly.

"I don't want anything," she murmured.

"Wud ye like a brooch, Jess?" he ventured, while he carefully buttered his toast.

"Oh, Davie, I tell you I don't want anything," she insisted, softly. "You mustn't think of spending your money on me. I'm sure we can't afford it."

"Havers! We're no' jist that length yet," he said, laughing. "An' whether I get the prize or no', ye're to get a brooch!"

Mrs. Houston looked at her plate. Her duty

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was becoming more difficult every minute. She felt she must make an effort without delay, or remain helpless for ever.

She raised her head suddenly, looked him in the face for a second, and laughed with well-feigned amusement.

“Whaur’s the joke, lassie?” asked her husband, reddening, but smiling good-humouredly.

“I—I was wondering,” she began and stopped.

“An’ what were ye wunnerin’? What kin’ o’ brooch ye wud like? Eh?”

“No, Davie; I was wondering what the baker and butcher and grocer would think if I went into their shops wearing a fine new brooch.”

“I dinna see——”

“Well, Davie, I’m afraid the baker and butcher and grocer would think, if they didn’t say it, that Mrs. Houston should pay her accounts before she got fine presents from her man.”

Her husband stared. “The accoonts are no’ that auld,” he said. “Nane o’ them abin sax month.”

“Oh, David!” exclaimed Jess, paling. “D’ you mean to tell me the accounts have been running all that time—months before we were married?”

“Weel, if ony o’ them wantit their money they wud ha’e askit for it,” he returned calmly. “I was meanin’ to pey up everything afore we

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got mairrit, but I clean forgot. Ye're no' angry, are ye, Jess ? ”

“ No, I'm not angry, but I am sorry. Did your sister, when she kept your house, not like to pay everybody quickly ? ”

“ She never fashed hersel', dearie. An' ye needna fash yersel' either. I mind ye said jist afore we got mairrit ye wud like to pey everything when ye got it, but——”

“ Every Saturday, Davie.”

“ Weel, ye see, that's no' easy arranged.”

“ But why ? ”

“ Because I canna get ma accoonts peyed every week.”

“ No ; but if you were once to get in some of your big accounts, you would surely have enough to go on with, and after that you could get people to pay you regularly and keep things going. Don't you see, Davie ? ” she said softly.

“ Ay,” said David slowly. “ I see what ye mean, but——”

“ David,” she said earnestly, “ you must try it, to please me.” Jess, in her old home, had known what overdue accounts were.

“ But, lass,” said her husband, passing her his cup. He got no further, and watched her anxiously.

She filled his cup before she spoke. Then she said kindly, but deliberately : “ I want

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you to send out all your accounts—the ones due, I mean—to-morrow. Please, Davie.”

“I’ll ha’e a look through the book to please ye,” he said after a pause. “But I’m no’ jist in the humour for accoonts, Jess.”

“Bring your books home, and I’ll send out the accounts. I’m used to that.” And she laughed, for she felt she was now on the path to victory.

“Ye’re owre guid to me. I—I doot ye’ll no’ think muckle o’ ma book-keepin’. An’ ye’ll no’ ha’e time to——”

“Never mind about that. Will you bring me the books to-morrow?”

“’Deed, ay. I’ll be gled to ha’e yer help, Jess, for I canna thole feegures.”

“Dear lad!” cried Jess, laughing with a tear in her eye, and got up hastily and kissed him.

* * * * *

At dinner time next day David brought home his two books, and in a shamefaced fashion laid them on the kitchen dresser. In the afternoon he had a job to do which he could not possibly postpone, and when he had left the cottage, his wife, having hastily put the kitchen straight, settled herself at the parlour table, and proceeded to investigate the books.

“Oh, my!” she whispered when she opened

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the first. The exclamation was one of sheer dismay, and for several minutes her heart was hopeless.

But she pulled herself together and plunged into the work she had set herself. In a couple of hours she had a sheaf of papers covered with jottings, and, later, when David settled down with his pipe for the evening, she overwhelmed him with queries.

"You'll have to help me, Davie," she said, pleasantly. "There are some things I don't quite understand about the ledger."

"'Deed, ay. There's a wheen things I dinna understaun' masel'," he returned with a laugh.

"Well, I'll ask you some questions, and you'll answer them."

"A' richt, lass."

"Well—a—have you had no work since the middle of March, Davie?"

"Plenty."

"But there's nothing about it in the ledger."

"I maun ha'e forgot to pit it in. But I've got it a' here." He produced some scraps of paper and handed them to her. "There ye are, Jess."

Mrs. Houston looked over the papers and busied herself for nearly an hour making entries in the ledger.

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“Is that all ? ” she asked at last.

“Ay, that’ll be everything.”

“But—but what about the new paling along at Mr. Morgan’s ? ”

“I maun ha’e forgot to pit it doon.”

“Well, I’ll put it down now. Tell me how much wood, and time, and money.”

He told her.

She wrinkled her brows as she made a jotting. “You’re charging four shillings too little,” she said presently.

“So I am,” he admitted sheepishly, after consideration.

“To-morrow you must walk through Kinlochan slowly and see if you can remember anything else you’ve forgotten to charge.”

“To-morrow’s the show.”

Jess checked an impatient word. “On Monday then, David,” she said quietly, and turned to the ledger again. “Here’s an account for £3 15s. 4¼d. against Mr. Macfarlane, Seaview, that’s been standing for two years. Why isn’t it paid ? ”

“Mr. Macfarlane’s deid.”

“Oh ! But still, his wife’s there.”

“But she’s no’ vera weel aff, puir leddy.”

“Surely she might have paid something.”

“Maybe.”

Jess turned to another page. “Here’s more

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than two pounds owing by Mrs. Fitzgerald. It's nearly as old."

"Weel, ye see, she gaed awa' kin' o' sudden."

"But you should have got her address, David."

"Ay; I daursay, lass. I aye intendit to get it."

"H'm! Then there's about thirty pounds owing by Sir Archibald more than a year. He should have paid you long ago. Why, here's a letter dated February asking you to send the account!"

"I'll see aboot it next week, Jess."

"*I'll* see about it to-night," she said a trifle sharply.

"Och, dinna fash yersel', dearie. I wish I hadna brocht ye the books."

"I'm glad you did, Davie," she replied more kindly. "I—I like a little of this work, you know, and I've made up my mind to keep your books for you in future. I know it's not very easy for a man with your sort of work to do clerking."

"'Deed, I never could thole it," he said, looking at her so gratefully that she smiled in her trouble.

Although she had a hundred more questions to ask him, she refrained, and asked but a few—one very particularly.

"Did you ever make up a balance sheet, Davie?"

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“ A balance sheet ? ”

“ Well, an account to show how much you owed and how much was owing to you, and how much you possessed altogether ? ”

He shook his head.

“ Well, well,” she said, “ don’t bother about it. I’m your clerk now, so you can go on with your newspaper.”

“ Oh, ye’re a great wumman ! ” he cried. “ I think I’ll tak’ a dauner roon the gairden. I hope it’s no’ gaun to rain. Come, Jess.”

But she refused quietly, and he went out alone to inspect the roses and pansies which would so soon increase or mar his reputation at the Ardmartin annual show.

* * * * *

David hardly slept a wink that night, for he was troubled about the weather. Before five o’clock he rose, dressed and went out of doors. The west wind was blowing down the loch in soft puffs and threatened to increase in force, while the skies promised a rainy day. By six o’clock David had cut his contributions to the flower show and placed them in the shallow tin tanks which had carried his blooms to the Ardmartin show since he was a lad of seventeen, nearly twelve years ago.

At seven o’clock the weather broke completely—strong wind and lashing rain. Jess

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was not sorry, though she pretended she was, that it was out of the question for her to attempt the road to Ardmartin, four miles distant. David was sadly disappointed. He wanted her to be with him at his expected triumph. The roses and pansies were taken away in a covered cart which collected the flowers of several other Kinlochan gardens and greenhouses, and David in his oilskins set out with a neighbouring gardener.

“Ye’ll be pleased if I get a first prize, wull ye no’ Jess ? ” he asked, ere he left the house.

“Surely, Davie,” she replied, honestly. And she almost prayed for his success, though she felt it would be against all her plans.

Early in the forenoon she set to work once more on the books, and made out the accounts due, or rather overdue. After that she turned to the pages devoted to her husband’s creditors. And there she received a shock.

“Oh, Davie, Davie ! ” she said half aloud, and nerved herself to make up a rough balance sheet. Her husband had provided her with an approximate valuation of his stock-in-trade, “as near as he could guess.”

The old clock in the kitchen struck again and again, but she did not hear it. Not till nearly five o’clock did she rise from the table, too weary to feel hungry, and put the books away in a safe place.

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She laid the tea things, and sat down to wait for her husband, wondering how she would break the bad news to him. For, looking at matters in the most favourable light, David Houston was insolvent—nearly a hundred pounds on the wrong side.

Jess heard him bidding good-bye to a friend at the gate, laughing merrily. Then the gate clicked, and he came running up to the house, calling upon her ere he was through the doorway.

“Jess, Jess! I’ve got twa firsts, I’ve got twa firsts! Whaur are ye, lass?”

He stood before her, six feet of health and strength, a goodly man to look at, proud, blithe and loving.

He poured forth his story, picked her out of the chair and hugged her, put her back, and dropped three greasy pound notes into her lap.

“There, ma lass! Twa first prizes! An’ every penny’s yer ain! My! I wish ye had been there! Ye wud ha’e been the prood wumman.”

He ran on, while she tried to smile back to him in spite of the thing that repeated itself in her mind—“Three pounds for a hundred pounds, three pounds for a hundred——”

“Wait a minute,” she gasped at last, and fled from the parlour. “I’m afraid the kettle’s boiling.”

She ran into the kitchen, shut the door and

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laid her face in her arms against the panel. . . . Five minutes later she went back to the parlour and kissed him. "I'm real glad, Davie," she said.

"Ye've been greetin', lass!" he cried, alarmed.

"No wonder! Two first prizes! You'll be a gardener yet, lad!" she added, almost solemnly.

During the evening he asked her how she had got on with the books.

But she was ready for the question—she was ready for anything now. "The books are mine now, Davie. I'll look after the books, and—and you'll look after the work that fills them."

"Ye're a great wumman, Jess!" he cried, admiringly. "I'll tak' ye to the next show, wat or dry!"



“Old Angus rose slowly from the bags of sawdust.”—PAGE 35



“Drawing furiously at his empty pipe.”—PAGE 40

II

IN THE WOOD

MRS. WALLACE opened the door under the signboard which announced in faded letters the fact that the shabby old timber building was occupied by "D. Houston, Joiner and Glazier," and entered the workshop. It was a sultry afternoon toward the end of August, and within there was neither movement nor sound save among the flies that hovered and buzzed against the dirty small-paned windows.

"Shop!" cried Mrs. Wallace, picking up a hammer from the nearest bench and thumping violently.

Old Angus rose slowly from the bags of sawdust whereon he had been dozing, a blackened clay pipe between his teeth, and came leisurely across the floor, peering drowsily at the visitor.

"Aw, it's yersel'," he muttered at last, recognizing Mrs. Wallace.

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“ Ay ; it’s masel’. Ye’re busy the day, shairly ! ” she returned, with a sarcastic smile.

“ Mphm ! I was that busy I forgot to lock the door,” he retorted good-humouredly.

“ Are ye no’ feart to gang to sleep wi’ yer pipe in yer mooth amang a’ thae sticks an’ shavins ? ” she asked severely.

“ Ma pipe’s toom, as ye can see, Mistress. If there was onything in it, ye wudna catch me nappin’.”

“ But whit wey dae ye keep an emp’y pipe in yer mooth, man ? ”

“ For comp’ny—jist for comp’ny. But it’s no’ vera entertainin’ comp’ny, an’ whiles I forget it. Was ye wantin’ onything the day, Mistress ? ”

“ I wis wantin’ yer maister.”

“ He’s no’ in the noo.”

“ I can see that for masel’.”

“ Weel, ye can believe ma word a’ the better.”

Mrs. Wallace gave an impatient sniff. “ When wull he be in ? ”

“ He didna say.”

“ Wull he be in the day ? ”

“ He micht, an’ he micht no’. Was ye wantin’ him parteeclar-like ? ”

“ Ay.”

“ That’s a peety.”

“ Tits, man ! When wis he in last ? ”

“ Afore denner.”

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“An’ whaur did he gang then ?”

“Hame to his denner. I dinna ken what he was to get to his denner, though.”

“I wasna speirin’.”

“I thocht I wud save ye the trouble.”

Mrs. Wallace sniffed again. “Ye’re gettin’ vera polite in yer auld age, Angus,” she remarked acidly.

“Ay, ay,” he returned, blinking cheerfully. “A man’s never cwer auld to learn. . . . It’s maybe different wi’ a wumman,” he added reflectively, with an absent-minded pull at his cold pipe.

Mrs. Wallace was too well accustomed to such sparring matches with old Angus to be deeply offended by his last observation. “Man, it’s a peety ye never got mairrit,” she remarked teasingly.

“Ye’re no’ the first to say that, Mistress,” he returned with an irritating grin.

“Well, I’m likely to be the last !” snapped Mrs. Wallace. “An’ I’ll bid ye guid-day, ye impiddent auld man !” She turned to the door, her beaded mantle, which she wore out of doors, summer and winter, shaking, partly with her wrath, and partly with her amusement.

“Oh, ye better bide a wee,” he said more genially. “What’s yer hurry ?”

“I dinna want to keep ye aff yer wark,” she retorted, facing round and glancing meaningly

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at the bags of sawdust. "Wull David Houston be in the shop the morn's mornin'?"

"I wudna say he'll no'."

"But wull he be in the shop for certain?" demanded she, impatiently.

"Ay; I daursay he'll be here."

"Are ye no' shair?"

"Ay; I'm shair."

"Mercy me!" she cried. "Whit wey did ye no' say that at the beginnin', man?"

"Och, I didna ken ye was in a hurry. Ha'e ye a job for him?"

"Deed, ay! Ma coal-cellar door's wantin' a new lock. I'm shair I tell't Jess to tell him aboot it mair nor a month syne."

"Ay. I mind him speakin' aboot it. It was on the slate, but maybe it got rubbit oot. . . . Mphm!" muttered Angus, taking down a cracked school slate from the wall, "it maun ha'e got rubbit oot when he was writin' doon ither orders. Ye can see for yersel' it's no' there."

Mrs. Wallace examined the slate, upon which there were several jottings. "Weel, ye can pit it doon noo," she said, curbing her temper.

"I'll dae that, Mistress," he returned pleasantly. He drew the wristband of his flannel shirt over his fist, and in a twinkling the slate was blank.

"My! Ye've did it noo!" she exclaimed.

"What's ado?"

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“Ye’ve rubbit oot a’ the orders that wis on the sclate !”

Angus stared ruefully at his handiwork. “Sirs, the day ! I maun be gettin’ auld,” he said dismally at last. “I hope the maister’ll mind what was on the sclate.”

Mrs. Wallace refrained from making an unkind remark. After all, she argued to herself, David ought to attend to his business personally, and *he* was the one to be blamed.

“What did ye say ye wantit, Mistress ?” asked Angus in a humbler voice. “A door for yer coal-cellar ?”

“Na, na ! Jist a lock for the door o’ the cellar.”

“Jist that. . . . Maybe ye wud write it doon yersel’, Mistress,” he said handing her the slate and pencil, as he always did to customers after offering to take down their orders.

Mrs. Wallace took the pencil and flung back the right wing of her mantle. “Whit’ll I pit doon ?” she asked, laying the slate on the bench and bending over it.

“Aw, jist write ‘Lock—Wallace.’ He’ll ken what that means.”

“Man, I wunner at ye keepin’ sic a bad pincil,” she remarked as she scrawled laboriously to the accompaniment of a hideous screeching. “It’s near as bad as playin’ the fiddle ! . . . Weel, see an’ no’ rub this oot, Angus,” she said, rising and adjusting her mantle.

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“ I’ll tak’ care, Mistress,” the old man replied in a subdued voice. He was very much ashamed of himself, and had no heart for further chaff.

“ Has yer maister been busy the week ? ” inquired Mrs. Wallace.

“ Ou, ay. Gey busy.”

“ Whit’s he workin’ at the noo ? ”

“ I think it’s his carnations the noo,” he answered, and could have bitten off his tongue the next instant. “ Ye muckle sumph ! Ye auld eediot ! ” he said to himself, “ what did ye tell her for ? ” . . . Then pulling himself together, he said aloud: “ An’ he’s had a wheen jobs aboot the place. ’Deed ay, he’s been gey busy the week, Mistress.”

Mrs. Wallace, after a short pause, said cuttingly : “ I’ll tell ye somethin’, Angus. Yer maister ocht to think shame o’ hissel’ ! ”

“ Hoo daur ye ? ” he roared in a sudden passion.

But the visitor, as though she had not heard him, hurried from the shop, banging the door behind her.

Full of indignation, the old fellow leant trembling against the bench, drawing furiously at his empty pipe. “ Hoo daur she say sic a thing ? ” he muttered again and again. For the admiration of his existence was centred in David Houston. Angus had room in his heart for only one other person besides David, the other person being his sister, a year younger than himself but



“Moodily surveying a dozen or so fowls that were scraping, pecking, or bathing in the warm dust of the road.”—PAGE 41



“Bending over a clump of carnations as if he loved them.”—PAGE 45

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ten years frailer—in fact, an invalid. Hence the emptiness of his pipe. His modest supply of tobacco, purchased on Saturday, invariably gave out by Wednesday night, unless supplemented, as now and then it was, by a gift from his master. His weekly wage was small, but he did little for it except make an occasional mistake, and David could not afford to pay him more.

Mrs. Wallace had not intended visiting her niece that afternoon, but she changed her mind on leaving the joiner's shop, and set out in the direction of the cottage, filled with the idea of surprising David at his gardening and delivering him a lecture on "sticking to his last."

Passing through the village, she caught sight of the grocer, who was standing at his door, moodily surveying a dozen or so fowls that were scraping, pecking, or bathing in the warm dust of the road. He appeared to be the only wakeful personage in the locality, the other shops in the row having their doors partly or wholly closed and their blinds drawn down—for the afternoon steamer, the arrival of which always created a stir, was not due for half an hour. It was too hot for cycling or walking, and the adult summer visitors remained indoors, or, at any rate, in the shadiest nooks of their gardens. From the shore came the chatter and laughing of children—the only human sound to be heard.

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Mrs. Wallace could seldom resist a little chat with the grocer, the reputed oracle of Kinlochan, and she halted at his door, remarking briefly—

“ Warm the day, Maister Ogilvy.”

“ Ye never said a truer word, Mistress Wallace. Are ye keepin’ middlin’ ? ”

“ Oh, I canna complain. Hoo’s trade ? ”

“ Bad—extraornar’ bad ! Never seen onythin’ like it.”

“ It maun be gey bad, for I’ve heard ye sayin’ the same for near ten year. It’s a guid job ye’ve no’ a wife an’ weans.”

“ It is that ! If I hadna been a single man I wud ha’e been in the Puirhoose lang syne. Ay ! ” And Mr. Ogilvy stuck his thumbs in his waistcoat arm-holes, half-shut his eyes, and drew a long breath of misery.

“ Havers, man ! Ye maun be daein’ a graun’ trade wi’ a’ thae simmer veesitors. I’m tell’t every hoose on the shore’s let, an——”

“ Simmer veesitors ! Guidsave ! I wish ye kent the simmer veesitors as weel as I dae, an’ ye wudna be speakin’ aboot graun’ trade ! No’ but what there’s a pickle dacent folk amang them. But if you was in ma poseetion, Mistress Wallace, an’ seen the boaxes an’ boaxes o’ groceries comin’ aff every boat frae the big grocers i’ the toon to the—the simmer veesitors, ye wud—ye wud—oh, I dinna ken what ye would dae ! It’s jist hert-

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rendin' ! An' me keepin' the best proveesions to be got ! Ach ! Whiles I think the stuff I keep's ower guid for the—the simmer veesitors."

"Dae they get their proveesions chaper frae the toon ? " put in Mrs. Wallace.

"I'll no' deny that they maybe get twa-three things a ha'penny or a penny chaper nor I can sell them. Botled peas, for instance—thae 'pettit poys,' ye ken. Ay, the 'pettit poys' is a guid example. Maybe ye'll ha'e noticed a vera stylish leddy that's been bidin' in The Grange since the beginnin' o' July ? She's aye fleein' aboot in a cairrage an' pair, an'——"

"Aw, ye mean Mistress Spright. I heard her man wis unco wealthy."

"That's her ! Aweel, she never cam' ower ma doorstep till the day afore yesterday—na, it was the day afore that—an' she left her cairrage an' pair at the door an' walkit in as if she was gaun to buy a' I had. An' I tell ye, I was rale pleased to see her, for I kent hers wud be a graun' custom. So I says, 'It's a fine day,' an' got ready ma book an' pincil."

"Wis she jist wantin' change ? " asked Mrs. Wallace.

"Na, na. But efter takin' a luk roon the place, she speirt if I had ony o' thae 'pettit poys'—at least I kent that was what she was efter, though she said it in a kin' o' high-falutin' style —'Pettee Poas' I think she said."

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“That’ll be Italian maybe.”

“Weel, I dinna ken. But onywey I had them, an’ showed them to her, an’ speirt hoo mony botles I wud send—for, of course, yin botle o’ peas is naethin’ to thae gentry. . . . An’ wud ye believe it, Mistress Wallace, she speirt the price, an’ when I tell’t her, she said she cud get them frae the toon a penny a botle chaper.”

“Weel, I never !”

“I was vexed at that, but I didna want to loss her custom, an’ I said if she was takin’ ither proveesions—an’ some o’ them’s chaper wi’ me nor in the toon—I wud tak the penny aff the peas. But she said she didna want onythin’ else, an’ the peas was ower dear ; but she had been passin’ an’ thocht she wud gi’e me a trial. An’ seein’ she was gaun to buy naethin’ ava’, I got kin’ o’ wild, an’ I says : ‘Deed, mem, it’s a trial that’s gey hard to bear!’ But she gaed oot to her cairrage wi’ her nose i’ the air, as if she hadna heard me. An’ *she’s* yin o’ yer simmer veesitors that brings trade to Kinlochan ! Humph !”

But this was not the information which Mrs. Wallace had hoped she might gain from Mr. Ogilvy, who was generally a day before his neighbours with the true news—not the mere gossip and rumours—of the district. Mrs. Wallace had heard a certain rumour, and she was anxious to have it confirmed, if possible, ere she went

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to the cottage. But Mr. Ogilvy, in his position of oracle, was not always in the humour for consultation, and she felt it would be vain to ask the question at the moment, for just then the steamer appeared in the distance, and the grocer seemed to be suffering from visions of heavy consignments that held no profit for himself.

So with a brief adieu she was turning away, when he said abruptly, "If ye're for Hazel Cottage, ye can tell David Houston that Maister Mathieson, o' Arden Hoose, 'll shin be wantin' estimates for repairin' a' his greenhouses—a fine big job. Ye best gi'e him the hint, for I heard the jiners in Kilmabeg and Fairport were efter it. Weel, guid-day to ye. Ye'll no' be needin' onythin' the noo?" concluded Mr. Ogilvy, who seldom forgot business.

"I'll maybe see ye on ma road hame," returned Mrs. Wallace, as she bustled off with her desired information. After some consideration by the way she decided to tell Jess, and not David, about the repairing of the Arden greenhouses.

She entered the garden of Hazel Cottage, to find the owner bending over a clump of carnations as if he loved them, as indeed he did. At the sight of him, her expression softened somewhat; for, after all, it was one thing to speak severely *of* David Houston, and quite another to speak severely *to* him.

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“Weel, Davie,” she said, advancing towards him.

“Mistress Wallace!” he exclaimed in a tone that suggested he was glad to see her; and he rose and shook hands with her with the queer mixture of dignity and easiness that had always attracted her in the days when he was courting her niece. Mrs. Wallace had many a time admitted to herself—only to herself—that there “wis somethin’ aboot Davie Houston she cudna get ower.”

“Jess’ll be richt pleased to see ye,” he went on, “an’ ye’ve jist come in time for a few o’ ma carnations. Jess was for takin’ them to ye hersel’, but I tell’t her I wud be prooder to gi’e ye them jist oot the gairden. . . . Ha’e! Smell that, Mistress Wallace,” said David, with pride in his voice, handing her a bunch of his blooms.

“Mphm! It’s no’ a bad scent that,” she admitted after a short inhalation. “It’s near as nice as cloves,” she added, endeavouring to be gracious, and wondering how she could introduce the subject of the lock for her coal-cellar door.

“But ye’ll be wantin’ to see Jess,” said David.

“Ay. Is she in the hoose?” Being answered in the affirmative, she nodded to David and left him, deciding that, possibly, it might be better to mention her complaint to her niece.

She found the young woman in the kitchen

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with her print sleeves rolled up and her arms up to the elbows in flour.

“ Preserve us ! Are ye tryin’ yer haun’ at the bakin’ noo ? ” she exclaimed, seating herself in the armchair.

“ Scones,” replied Jess with a somewhat rueful smile.

“ Ye’re the yin for tryin’ ! ”

“ D’you think I never succeed, Aunt ? ”

“ Whiles. Ye canna expec’ to ken muckle aboot keepin’ a hoose efter workin’ in an office. But nae doot ye’ll learn. Let’s see yin o’ yer scones, lassie.”

Jess, with more colour in her face than the fire had given it, passed one of her productions to the old lady, and awaited her verdict with dire forebodings.

Mrs. Wallace fingered the scone, bit it, swallowed the fragment with exaggerated effort and much facial contortion, and solemnly laid the remainder on the table.

Her verdict was delivered in a single word “ *Cahootchy !* ”

Jess tried to smile, but her lip trembled. “ I didn’t think they were quite so tough as all that,” she said, recovering herself, and refraining from mentioning the fact that five or ten minutes before her aunt’s arrival her husband had eaten a couple, apparently with supreme satisfaction.

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“Aw, ye’ll maybe dae better next time,” remarked Mrs. Wallace doubtfully. “Dinna work wi’ yer scones as if they wis clay. Dinna press heavy on them, for ye micht as weel pit them through a patent mangle. Be awfu’ carefu’ wi’ the sody, an’ no’ let it gang in lumps, for a lump o’ sody in a scone’s as bad’s a rid nose on a teetotaler.”

Mrs. Houston laughed. “I’m much obliged, Aunt Wallace. I’ll try and mind your advice, and maybe some night when you come to your tea, I’ll have scones for you to try.”

“’Deed, ay. Dinna be dooncast. Try, try, try again! Ye’re young yet. . . . An’ hoo’s Davie gettin’ on?” she inquired suddenly.

“Fine,” replied Jess. “He’s had a lot of work this week.”

“In the gairden?” said Mrs. Wallace, glancing at the carnations lying in her lap.

“No. This is the first afternoon he’s had for the garden this week. It was me that kept him at home this afternoon, for I knew he was wearying to look after his carnations. They’re beauties, aren’t they?”

“Ye didna notice if he was wearyin’ to pit that new lock on ma coal-cellar door?”

“Oh, Aunt, has he——” For a moment Jess was confused. Then she said, “I’m sorry I forgot to tell him about the lock. It was my fault.”

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“Ye didna forget to tell him. I wis speakin’ to Angus the day, an’ he said it had been doon on the slate, but got rubbit oot. So ye needna blame yersel’. I pit it doon on the slate again masel’, so he’ll maybe mind afore the year’s oot.”

“I’ll remind him myself,” said Jess. She experienced a feeling of disappointment, for during the week she had been elated to observe the regular and almost willing fashion in which her husband had been attending to his work.

“There’s anither thing ye can tell him.” Mrs. Wallace proceeded to retail the information received from the grocer, concluding with—
“I doot it’s ower big a job for yer man, but it’ll be a peety if a jiner ootside Kinlochan gets it. I’ve heard talk o’ anither jiner settin’ up in Kinlochan, an’ if the greenhouse job was gaun by yer man, it micht come to mair nor talk, an’ that wud be a bad thing for David Houston—an’ yersel’, Jess. . . . Weel, I maun be aff.”

“Wait, Aunt Wallace, and I’ll get you a cup of tea.”

“Na, na. Never heed the tea. I’ve got ma ludgers to luk efter. Never tak’ in ludgers, ma lassie. They’re jist a *torment*. I never done it afore this year, an’ I’ll never dae’t again—never! It’s hard-earned siller. I thocht I wud like to mak’ a pound or twa extra, but——”

“What have they been doing now?”

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“Aw, naethin’ new. Jist the same auld gemm—comin’ doon wi’ the late boat when I’ve got their teas ready for the early yin, an’ comin’ wi’ the early yin when I’m no’ lukin’ for them till the late yin; an’ sleepin’ in i’ the mornin’, an’ sweerin’ I never waukened them when ma haun’s sair wi’ chappin’ at the bedroom doors; an’ cryin’ oot for suppers—*hot* suppers, mind ye!—at eleeven o’clock at nicht; an’ hammerin’ their hired piany, an’ singin’ an’ smokin’ an’ playin’ cairds till twa i’ the mornin’; an’—weel, their time’s up at the end o’ the month, an’ I’ll no’ be greetin’ to see their backs. Dear knows when I’ll get the smell o’ smoke oot ma paurLOUR. Nae mair ludgers for me!”

A minute later Mrs. Wallace took her departure, and Jess set about tidying up and preparing the evening meal.

Afterwards, as she and David sat in the garden enjoying the cool breeze that had risen at last, Jess referred to her aunt’s visit and the subjects connected with it.

“You know, Davie,” she said, “I don’t blame Angus. He’s getting old, and you can’t expect him to be very brisk. But you’ll have to look after the orders yourself. It’ll never do to put things on the slate if he’s going to rub them out.”

“Puir auld Angus,” said David, with a lenient smile. “He does his best. Onywey, I think

IN THE WOOD

I can mind a' that was on the sclate the day. Dinna fash yersel' about it, lass."

"I'm glad you can mind the orders, Davie. But it isn't the first time it has happened. Angus told Aunt that her order for a lock for her coal-cellar door had been rubbed out some time ago."

"Oh, ye're no' to blame Angus for that, for I rubbit it oot masel'."

"Well, you see, you've forgotten about the lock."

"But I didna want to mind about the lock. Yer aunt's no' needin' a lock on her cellar door. Wha's gaun to steal her coals?"

"Oh, Davie, you're the queerest man!" she cried, half laughing. "It doesn't matter to us what people need. It's what they ask for."

"But I—*we* dinna keep a lock on *oor* cellar door. Yer aunt has a snib on hers, an' that's a' she needs. . . . Are ye wantin' me to pit a lock on her cellar door, Jess?"

"Of course. It's business, Davie."

"Aweel, I'll see about it," he returned in a tone of resignation.

"To-morrow, Davie?"

"Ay, maybe the morn."

With which answer Jess had to be content. At any rate, in her eagerness to tell him about the Arden House greenhouses, she let the matter drop. She told him briefly.

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To her delight he became enthusiastic at once.

"I maun get that job!" he cried. "My! ye sud see the gairdens at Arden Hoose! I wud tak' the job jist to be workin' there."

"But you mustn't run away and offer to do it for nothing," she said, smiling.

"Nae fears, Jess. *You'll* keep me richt when we mak' up the estimate."

"I'll try to," said Jess quietly, but looking pleased. It was sweet to think that already he recognized in her a little more than the mere housewife.

"I'll gang to Arden the morn," he went on. "I ken the heid-gairdener, an' he'll no' let his maister gang past a Kinlochan man if he can help it. . . . Ay, I think I'll get the job, lass, an' then ye'll no' be aye thinkin' we're gaun bankrupt."

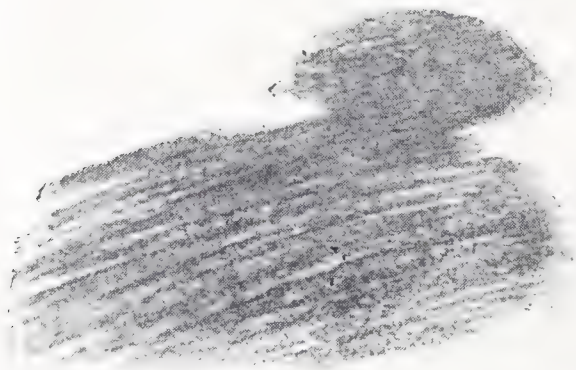
"I'm sure I never——" she began.

"Well, whiles when ye're workin' at the books ye luk unco serious. No' but what I used to luk that wey masel' afore ye took chairge o' the books."

"The books are getting cheerier every day, lad," she said. And so they were, but very, very little. There was a big account due to David's principal timber-merchant which sometimes kept Jess awake at night. Still, there



“His face in his hands crushed and miserable.”—PAGE 53



“Sitting in the cottage porch darning her husband’s socks.”—PAGE 55

IN THE WOOD

was an improvement, and if David got the Arden job, she felt he would be well on his way out of the wood wherein he did not know he was wandering.

“ I’m shair I dinna ken what I wud dae wantin’ ye, Jess,” he murmured.

* * * * *

A fortnight later David Houston’s estimate was accepted.

“ I’m to get twa men to help me,” he told his wife. “ It’s the best peyin job I ever had. ’Deed, ye’re the wumman to mak’ up an estimate ! An’ noo ye micht jist write to Hardy and Son for the wudd. I’ll tell ye what to say.”

So Jess, in her best business hand, wrote to the great timber merchants.

And two days went past.

And on the third morning David Houston was sitting in the armchair, his face in his hands, crushed and miserable.

Jess, pale but firm, was reading for the third time the following type-written words :—

“ DEAR SIR,

“ We regret we cannot see our way to execute your order of yesterday’s date until your present account—statement enclosed—which, you must be aware, is very much overdue, is settled. Your cheque per return will oblige,

“ Yours truly, HARDY & SON.”

III

A WAY OUT

MRS. WALLACE found Jess sitting in the cottage porch darning her husband's socks.

"Ye didna expec' to see *me* the day," she said, shaking hands and taking the chair which Jess had vacated.

"But I'm glad to see you, Aunt Wallace. How are the lodgers getting on?" Jess spoke hurriedly. Her thoughts had not been entirely on the socks.

"The ludgers is gettin' on fine," said Mrs. Wallace sourly. "But they're gettin' aff the morn's mornin', an', as ye see, I'm no' whit ye wud ca' conshumed wi' grief. Hoo are ye gettin' on yersel', lass?"

"First rate."

"Mphm! I see ye're at the dernin'."

"It's got to be done, Aunt Wallace."

"That's whit ye'll be sayin' fifty year efter

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this, if ye're spared. But ye'll no' say it as cheery-like. Na ! ”

Jess laughed, not altogether freely. “ After all, it's not such an awful business,” she remarked.

“ There's naethin' awfu' but a boat capsizin' or a railway collusion,” returned Mrs. Wallace austerely. “ As ye say, the dernin' o' yer man's socks is no' an awfu' business. An' it keeps ye oot o' mischief. It's better for ye nor fleein' about an' crackin' wi' yer neebours.”

It occurred to Jess to offer the old lady a few undarned socks to take home with her, but she refrained.

“ 'Deed, ay ! ” went on Mrs. Wallace. “ I'm gled ye've aye plenty to dae. There's plenty clatterin' tongues in Kinlochan wi'oot addin' to them. As I wis comin' along the road the noo I seen Mistress Foulis leanin' ower the hedge ha'ein' a crack wi' Mistress Macgregor, an' ye wud ha'e thocht the twa o' them wis tryin' for a prize for the yin that got oot the maist words in a meenit. I wisht ye had heard the gabblin', Jess !—for it wis jist gabblin' an' naethin' else.”

“ Were they quarrelling ? ”

“ Na, na. If they had been quarrellin' there wud ha'e been some excuse. I'm kin' o' quick wi' ma tongue masel' when I'm pit oot. But the twa of them wis jist ha'ein' a bit crack about



“Leanin’ ower the hedge ha’ ein’ a crack.”—PAGE 56



“A short object lesson in darning.”—PAGE 58

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naethin' in parteeclar. An' when folk stairt to crack aboot naethin', there's naethin' can stop them. Na!"

"Which deserved the prize, d'you think?" Jess asked, for the sake of saying something.

"Aweel, I wudna like to say. But I doot Mistress Foulis wud win in the end, for Mistress Macgreegor's that stoot an' gets oot o' breith efter an 'oor or twa. It's practice that keeps *her* up, for her an' Mistress Foulis are aye at it. I never come along the road wi'oot hearin' them. An' I'm shair I hope ye'll never be like either' o' them, ma lass."

"I hope not, Aunt Wallace," said the niece with a smile.

"But ye're nane the waur o' a bit warnin'. Ye never ken whit's afore ye. I've seen mony a quate young yin like yersel' turn into a hav'erin' buddy jist frae sheer want o' plenty to dae. So it's a' for yer guid if yer man's sair on his socks."

Here Mrs. Wallace picked up one of the articles in question and examined it critically.

"I'm afraid I'm not a very neat darner," said Jess, partly irritated and partly amused.

"I wud be tellin' a lee if I said ye wis," returned her aunt. "Maybe ye've heard tell o' the man—I canna mind whether he wis a saint or a eediot—that gaed aff on a pilgrimage wi' peas in his shoes. Eh?"

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Mrs. Houston laughed good naturedly. "I've heard that he boiled the peas first, aunt."

"Mphm! . . . I suppose ye're intendin' for to bile yer man's socks? Ha! ha! ha! . . . Tits, lassie, I'm no' meanin' to hurt yer feelin's. Yer dernin' isna jist as bad as a' that. See! Gi'e's yer needle for a meenit." And the elder woman proceeded to give the young one a short object-lesson in darning.

"I don't know how you do it, Aunt Wallace," cried Jess at last, her slight resentment giving place to honest admiration. "You could hardly tell it was a darn!"

"Havers!" muttered Mrs. Wallace, trying not to look pleased. "But ye see hoo it's done? Eh?"

The young woman nodded.

"Ma guidman used to say he preferred the derns to the rest o' the sock. He wis an' unco blether, wis ma guidman, when he wis leevin'," said Mrs. Wallace. "He wis aye peyin' compliments or makin' complaints. Ye'll hardly mind yer Uncle Wallace, Jess?"

"Not very well."

"Ah, ye canna be expec'it to mind him. But for a man he wisna bad—na, he wisna bad. In fac', I micht say I never kent a better man. An', efter a', his complainin' micht ha'e been waur, an' his compliments cudna ha'e been better.

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Ye see, he aye peyed a compliment jist afore he made a complaint, so I wis aye ready for the complaint, an' I jist never heedit. There's naethin' cures a man's complaints quicker nor peyin' nae attention to them. Yer uncle never complained twice aboot the same thing. He aye had something new, an' that kep' him frae gettin' tiresome. 'Deed, ay; he wisna bad for a man. . . . Has yer ain man begood to complain yet ? ”

Jess laughed and shook her head.

“Aweel, there's time enough. But when he begins, dinna fash yersel'. Noo an' then ye can gi'e him a saft answer like whit I used to gi'e whiles to yer uncle. I mind yinst he slep' in i' the mornin', an' cam' gey late to his breakfast. ‘Whit kep' ye ?’ says I. . . . ‘Oh, says he, smilin' that sweet-like, ‘I cudna help turnin' ower an' ha'ein anither wee bit dream aboot ye, ma dear.’. . . That wis the compliment, Jess, an' I kent fine there wis mair to come. . . . ‘This ham's hauf cauld,’ he says, lukin' at me across the table. . . . That wis the complaint, ye see ! . . . ‘Weel,’ says I, wi'oot lossin' ma temper, ‘if ye dinna eat it quick, it'll be quite cauld.’. . . He never spoke o' ham again. As I wis sayin', a saft answer's worth tryin' noo an' then.”

Mrs. Wallace paused for a few seconds. Then in her usual abrupt fashion she said, “An' whit took David to Glesca the day ? ”

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Jess started. Her husband had gone to town by the early steamer, and she had been hoping that her aunt was unaware of the fact. "Did you see Davie, Aunt Wallace?" she inquired, stooping to pick up the sock she had dropped.

"Ogilvy the grocer wis tellin' me he seen him gaun on board the boat, an' twa-three ither folk in Kinlochan wis speirin' if I kent whit his business wis."

Mrs. Houston flushed angrily. "His business is none of theirs, anyhow!" she said quickly.

"Och, ye needna flee up, Jess," said Mrs. Wallace soothingly, but with a curious glance at her niece. "It's just the Kinlochan wey. Ye micht ken that by this time."

"It's a horrible way!" cried the other, her lip quivering.

"Toots, havers! There's naethin' horrible but murder an' earthquakes. Ye see the folk thocht it wis kin' o' queer for yer man to gang to Glesca the day, when he micht ha'e waitit till Seturday an' got the chape ticket."

"But this is only Tuesday."

"Ah, but the Kinlochan folk thinks it maun be gey important business or pleasure if it canna wait twa-three days."

"I don't care what the Kinlochan folk think!"

"Weel, weel, it's jist their curiosity, an' I suppose they dinna mean ony hairm, though I



“Mrs. Houston....left the porch to meet her visitor who came up the path with a businesslike air.”—PAGE 63



"To town by the early steamer."—PAGE 60

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wudna like to be aye curious aboot ither folk's business like some o' them. Ma motto is mind yer ain business. Ay ! ”

In spite of her worry Jess nearly laughed.

“ ’Deed, ay ! ” continued Mrs. Wallace. “ It’s a sad job when folk is aye wunnerin’ an’ speirin’ aboot yin anither. . . . I suppose ye’re expec’in’ David hame the nicht ? ”

“ Oh, yes. I think he’ll be here with the next boat.”

“ Ye wud be rale prood that he got the job o’ the Arden greenhooses.”

“ Yes, of course,” Mrs. Houston answered, trying to smile.

“ I wis hearin’ the Fairport jiner wis wild at no’ gettin’ the job. He had been ower shair o’ gettin’ it, an’ he had laid in a heap o’ wudd, an’ noo he disna ken whit to dae wi’ the wudd, the stupit buddy ! Ye can be ower smairt as weel as ower slow in this warld. I dinna think David Houston wud ha’e made a mistake that wey. Nae doot it’s the wudd that took him to Glesca the day.”

“ Yes,” said Jess, wondering miserably how her husband had succeeded in his interview with Hardy & Son.

“ I kin’ o’ thocht it wis the wudd,” said Mrs. Wallace, secretly delighted at having extracted her desired information. For once she had got

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ahead of Mr. Ogilvy, who had been inclined to think that the joiner had gone to town merely on pleasure, seeing that he had worn a felt hat, and not the ordinary cloth cap.

“Weel, I maun gang noo, she announced, preparatory to rising. “I suppose yer man hasna been talkin’ in his sleep lately ?”

“No,” said Mrs. Houston, a little puzzled.

“I thocht he micht ha’e mentioned a lock for ma coal-cellar door. Of course, ye ken, I dinna want to hurry him, but I’ve a kin’ o’ ambeetion, as it were, to see a lock on that door afore I dee. But maybe it’s whit the story-books ca’ a wild an’ hopeless ambeetion. Hooever, ye can tell David I’m no’ thinkin’ o’ deein’ for a year or twa yet, an’—Mercy me! wha’s this comin’ to see ye ?”

A lady was bidding another lady good-bye at the gate, and was evidently about to enter.

“Oh dear!” sighed Jess. “It’s Miss Perk, from Point View.”

“If it’s her,” said Mrs. Wallace, rising, “she’s gotten a new hat, an’ a daft-like yin forbye. Weel, I canna thole Miss Perk, hat or nae hat; so I’ll bid ye——”

“Don’t go, Aunt Wallace, please don’t go,” the young wife implored. “If you stay she won’t wait long. If she catches me alone she’ll wait till Davie comes home, and I—I don’t want that.”

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“Ye dinna mean to tell me ye’re feart for *her* !”

“I am, I am! At least I’m not exactly afraid, but—but—I don’t care about her. She’s always coming to lecture me about Davie.”

“D’ye tell me that? She better leave that to me, the impiddent auld maid! She thinks she’s a kin o’ queen amang the Kinlochan folk because she bides here through the winter an’ tak’s the front place at a’ the sewin’-meetin’s an’ the like. An’ the warst o’ it is, the Kinlochan folk boo doon to her—no’ for love, for she never gi’ed awa’ onythin’ dearer nor advice that naebody wants, but jist for—Aw, here she’s comin’.” Mrs. Wallace’s voice sank to a whisper. “Never heed, Jess. I’ll no’ desert ye.”

Mrs. Houston threw her relative a grateful glance, and left the porch to meet her visitor, who came briskly up the path with a business-like air, and a somewhat patronizing smile.

Miss Perk, who, with an aged mother, lived “on her money” at Point View, might have been anything between forty and sixty years of age, to judge by her appearance. Let us call it fifty. She was middle-sized, mentally as well as physically, but among the Kinlochan natives she had gained the reputation, of being “mair nor or’nar’ clever for a wumman,” and was held in considerable awe, if not respect. She had gained her reputa-

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tion for cleverness by the simple method of talking a deal and doing little. And yet it would be unfair to deny that she meant well, But she was a woman given to such phrases as “quite a lady” and “a terribly common person”; and, though overflowing with good advice for her humbler fellow beings, she was practically void of tact. She forced herself upon the Kinlochan folk, who were too simple and kindly to tell her to mind her own business. As a young man once put it—vulgarly, perhaps—she tried to elevate the masses like balloons—with gas.

She shook hands with Jess as if she were conferring a favour. “I thought I would just pop in and see how you were getting on after our last little chat, Mrs. Houston,” she said graciously. “Has your husband come home yet?”

“No, Miss Perk,” Jess replied, adding, “my aunt is with me this afternoon.”

“Oh, indeed,” said Miss Perk shortly, and at that moment she caught sight of Mrs. Wallace sitting in the porch, her face wearing its grimmest expression.

Miss Perk was annoyed, but, assuming her platform smile, she stepped forward and shook hands with the older woman. “How do you do, Mrs. Wallace? Is this not a beautiful day?”

“I’m pretty middlin’, thenk ye; an’ I’m no’ sayin’ onythin’ agin the weather. . . . Jess, ye

A WAY OUT

micht bring a sate here for yer veesitor. I ken ye canna ask her into the hoose the day."

As a matter of fact, the cottage had never been tidier, but Mrs. Wallace had the presentiment that, out of politeness, her niece might be weak enough to invite Miss Perk to sit in the parlour.

Jess brought a chair, which Miss Perk accepted, though she would rather have gone indoors, leaving Mrs. Wallace to herself. Still, she was not going to allow the presence of a "common old woman" to interfere with the object of her visit.

"Will you take a cup of tea?" Mrs. Houston hospitably inquired.

"Oh, no, thank you. I had tea at Mrs. Spright's a few minutes ago."

Here Mrs. Wallace scored again. "Thenk ye, ma dear," she said calmly to Jess, "I cud dae wi' a dish o' yer fine tea. An' I'll tak' it oot here when it's ready. Maybe yer veesitor 'll change her mind."

"No, thank you," said Miss Perk stiffly.

"Please excuse me leaving you," said Jess.

"Oh, certainly. We can have our little chat presently."

Mrs. Wallace's lips tightened. "Maybe," she said to herself.

Mrs. Houston, rather alarmed by her aunt's temerity in braving such an important person as Miss Perk, left the ill-assorted twain, and retired to the kitchen.

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A silence brooded in the porch till at last Miss Perk, smothering her irritation, remarked with forced pleasantness—

“ I don’t think I ever see you at any of our meetings, Mrs. Wallace.”

“ I daursay that, mem.”

“ The winter is approaching again, and we expect to have some delightful and, I think I may add, really helpful meetings. I am preparing a series of lectures on ‘ The first year of married life,’ which I hope will——”

“ Weel, I doot that’s a wee thing juvenile for me, mem. An’, forbye, I’m better at gi’ein’ a bit lectur’ masel’ nor listenin’ to yin,” said Mrs. Wallace with a dry smile.

The other attempted a laugh as she returned : “ Still, Mrs. Wallace, I think you would find it worth while to attend, and persuade Mrs. Houston and her husband to attend also.”

Mrs. Wallace did not respond.

“ I may say I take a great interest in your niece,” continued Miss Perk.

“ I micht say the same, mem.”

“ Yes, yes. No doubt,” said Miss Perk, with an impatient movement of her hand. “ And I may say further that I consider her quite a capable young woman, whose mind has been cultivated, considering her station in life, to a considerable extent. . . . What did you say, Mrs. Wallace ? ”

A WAY OUT

“I didna say onythin’,” said the other, apparently swallowing something.

“Well, as I was about to observe, I feel it would be a pity if that cultivation were now to cease. No doubt her husband is an estimable man, though I could wish him more industrious. I heard that he went to town this morning, obviously for a day’s pleasure, and I hear many complaints of his dilatoriness in executing the orders entrusted to him. Personally I should not dream of asking him to perform any repairs on my account.”

Miss Perk was so taken up with herself that she failed to notice the countenance of Mrs. Wallace. “Now,” she went on, “I’ve no doubt that if you would induce Mr. and Mrs. Houston to attend our meetings, they would both benefit considerably. As I said, the husband is doubtless an estimable man, but there is certainly room for improvement, mentally if not morally. You, Mrs. Wallace, must naturally be anxious about your niece’s welfare, and, of course, it is your duty to influence the young couple in the right direction.”

Mrs. Wallace, with a tremendous effort, restrained her temper, but her speech was thick, while beads of perspiration broke out on her wrinkled forehead. “I canna say I see muckle wrang wi’ Jess an’ her man. They’re kind to yin anither, an’ they’re happy thegither, an’, efter a’,

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it's nae great maitter if yin or twa o' the gentry aboot here gangs to the jiners at Kilmabeg or Fairport."

"Yes, yes," returned Miss Perk in some confusion. "Of course, I never meant to imply that there was anything *wrong*; nor did I suggest that they were not kind and happy. But is kindness and happiness sufficient?"

"'Deed, ay! If ye ha'e them in plenty."

Miss Perk shook her head pityingly. "It is the duty of every human being to improve his or her intellect, Mrs. Wallace."

"D'ye mean books, mem? For Jess is a great reader when she gets the time, and her man's no' jist as eegnorant as some micht suppose."

"Books are certainly good, but I hold that the spoken word is more effective."

"Mphm! . . . Whiles . . . But I doot guid books is easier got nor guid speakers, mem."

"Good speakers, as you suggest, are no doubt comparatively rare," said Miss Perk modestly.

"But one must do one's best." She was going to say a good deal more, but Mrs. Wallace sat up in her chair and bawled through the doorway—

"Jess! Is ma tea no' ready yet?"

"Just coming," came the reply.

"I suppose it is time you were getting home, Mrs. Wallace. I understand you have some young men lodging with you," Miss Perk remarked

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pleasantly. She had a satisfied feeling that she had impressed the old woman, yet looked forward to getting rid of her.

“Oh, I’m in plenty o’ time for ma ludgers, thenk ye. But I dinna want to keep Jess frae gettin’ ready for her man comin’ hame. I sudna ha’e askit for the tea, I doot.”

“I should much like to have a word with Mr. Houston,” said the visitor.

“Weel, ye’ll get him in the shop near every day. He’ll be busy for a while at the Arden greenhouses. . . . Oh, ye didna hear he had gotten that job? ’Deed, it wis a fine compliment to him! But, ye see, he’s an extra fine workman; an’ if folk wants a thing done weel—no’ hurried an’ chape, ye ken—they gang to David Houston.”

At this juncture Jess arrived with the tea, and Mrs. Wallace, having helped herself, said, with unusual geniality—

“I’m vexed for gi’ein’ ye a’ this trouble, ma lass, for ye’ll need to be gettin’ ready for yer man. . . . Hech! but I near burnt ma mooth! I’ll tak’ a drappie mair mulk, an’ drink it quick.” She gulped her tea in a fashion that Miss Perk thought extremely vulgar. “Weel, that wis maist refreshin’! An’ noo it’s time I wis awa’. Ye better see aboot yer man’s tea. I’m shair yer veesitor ’ll excuse ye.”

Mrs. Houston felt and looked uncomfortable

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as Miss Perk rose, red with anger, and said coldly—

“I fear I must be going, but I shall hope to have a little chat with you on an important matter ere long. I trust it may be at a more convenient season. Good-bye, Mrs. Houston. Remember me to your husband. Good-bye, Mrs. Wallace——”

“Oh, we’ll gang to the gate thegither,” said Mrs. Wallace with the utmost cheerfulness. “Come awa’, Jess.”

Miss Perk did not wait for a second good-bye at the gate, but marched off without delay.

“I wis feart she micht slip back efter I wis awa’,” said Mrs. Wallace with a chuckle.

“Oh, aunt,” cried Jess, “I hope you didn’t offend her. I shouldn’t have left her like you. But I—I couldn’t bear her to-day, and I’m so thankful to you.”

“Havers, lass! Never you heed her. She’s jist a bletherin’ buddy. Aff ye gang an’ get yer man’s tea ready. I’ll maybe see ye the morn when I’m quit o’ ma ludgers. G idbye, ma dearie.”

* * * * *

It was a very dejected husband that came home towards evening. Jess was in the porch waiting for him, and at the sight of him coming up the path from the gate, without the merest

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glance at the flower-beds, all the hope in her heart went out like a flash.

He laid his hand for an instant on her shoulder, and walked past her into the kitchen. She brushed away a tear, and followed him.

“Your tea’s ready, Davie,” she said quietly.

“Ay,” he returned indifferently, seating himself at the neatly arranged table.

He made a poor meal, but she made a poorer.

“Have your smoke, Davie,” she said when he had pushed away his plate.

He followed her suggestion in silence, keeping his eyes lowered. Indeed, he had not faced her since his return.

At length Jess spoke. “Would they not give you what you wanted, Davie?” she asked softly.

“Jist that,” he muttered.

“Poor lad! Did you see Mr. Hardy himself?”

David shook his head. “The auld man that ma fayther did business wi’ is deed an’ gane. I’m thinkin’ it wud ha’e been different if he had been there, Jess,” he added sadly.

“And who did you see?”

“The managin’ director, I was tell’t. But I dinna mind his name.”

“And he wouldn’t oblige you?”

“No’ wi’ a penny’s worth. An’ I had to g’e him a bill at three months for the accoont.”

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“A bill—at three months? Oh, Davie!”

“Ye may weel be ashamed o’ yer man, Jess,” he groaned miserably.

“Ashamed! I’ll never be that. Did you try any of the other wood merchants?”

“I hadna the hert. Ye see it was sic a lot o’ wudd that was needit. They wud ha’e wantit cash, or a reference at least. . . . I’ll jist ha’e to fling up the Arden job. I canna ask for money in advance, though I’ve nae doot I wud get it. But I canna dae’t. . . . I’m rale vexed for ye, ma lass.”

“Oh, Davie! You’re not to talk that way! Indeed, you’re not to talk about it at all for a little, and then we’ll see what’s to be done. I’m quite sure you won’t have to fling up the Arden job. You’ll get wood somehow. . . . Away out to the garden till I get the dishes washed.”

He obeyed silently, and his wife, neglecting the dishes, sat down in the armchair and thought hard. She had an idea, but she was afraid to mention it to him lest it should prove unworkable. But at last she made up her mind, and followed him to the garden, where he was already interested in some of his flowers.

“Davie,” she began nervously, “is there anything special about this wood you require? Would it do for anything besides greenhouses?”

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“No’ for mony things. The wudd wantit for Arden is a special sort an’ a special size. But what dae ye——”

“Are there many big greenhouses about Fairport ? ”

“Na ! Nane ava’. But——”

“Who is the joiner at Fairport, Davie ? ”

“Jamie Proudfoot.”

“Do you know him ? ”

“Fine. He used to work for ma fayther.”

“But you and he are quite friendly ? ”

“What for no’ ? But, Jess——”

“But he was trying for the Arden job, wasn’t he ? That wasn’t very friendly, surely.”

“Och, that was a’ in the wey o’ business. But what are ye speirin’ for, Jess ? ”

Jess summoned all her courage. “Well, I was just wondering if—if you couldn’t get the wood from Jamie Proudfoot. He would trust you, wouldn’t he ? ”

“I’m shair he wud dae that, lass,” said David sadly ; “but, ye see, he’s no’ a merchant. He hasna got the wudd I need.”

“But he has ! ” cried she, a note of hope in her voice. And she told David the little bit of news she had heard from her aunt.

“Weel, weel,” said David, when he understood. “If I had kent that, I wud never ha’e gaed to Glesca the day.”

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“It was me that made you go to Glasgow,” she sighed. “Poor Davie.”

“Ma dear! It was the richt thing to dae,” he said, half in sorrow, half in shame.

“And will you go and see the Fairport man now?” she asked eagerly.

“The nicht?”

She nodded. “It won’t take you long on your bicycle. An’—an’, Davie, make him think you’re doing him a favour taking the wood off his hands, for that’s just what you are doing, and tell him straight that you won’t pay him for a while yet; d’you understand?”

“Ay,” he said after a moment. His eyes, alight with admiration, were turned to her.

She touched him lightly on the cheek. “Get your bicycle,” she said.

A minute later she watched him ride away on his old solid-tyred machine. “Good luck, Davie!” she called after him.

By the next afternoon Jamie Proudfoot’s wood was in David Houston’s yard, and in spite of the bill at three months Jess went about her work singing.



“‘Good luck, Davie!’ she called after him.”—PAGE 74



“A wean fell aff his doorstep wi’ hauf-a-dizzen eggs she had jist bocht.”—PAGE 79

IV

MRS. WALLACE AT HOME

OH, it's yersel', is it?" said Mrs. Wallace, opening the door to her niece. "Whit's ado? Ye're faur ower early. Ye wis bidden to come at sax, an' it's jist new chappit five. Whaur's Davie?"

"He's coming at the proper time, Aunt Wallace; but I hurried up with my work and came along to see if I could help you with anything," Jess returned pleasantly.

"I'm nae great believer in folk—especially young mairrit weemen—hurryin' up wi' their wark, as ye pit it, an' I'm no' whit I wud ca' in desperate need o' assistance. But seein' ye're here, ye best come in."

Mrs. Houston, with a smile, accepted the not very gracious invitation, and made to step indoors.

"Wipe yer feet, wipe yer feet!" exclaimed her aunt, pointing to the mat. "I'm jist new done

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washin' the wauxcloth. Ma certy! D'ye think I want a gairden in ma lobby for yer man to plant carnations in? . . . Aw, that'll dae. Ye needna rub a hole in ma mat. Come ben the hoose."

Suppressing a laugh, Jess entered the cottage and followed Mrs. Wallace to the kitchen.

"You've been baking, Aunt Wallace," she remarked, as she unpinned her plain straw hat.

"Ay, I've been bakin.' If ye had come shinner ye micht ha'e gotten a lesson. But ye're ower late noo."

"I'm very sorry," murmured Mrs. Houston. "Were you baking scones?"

"I wisna bakin' cahootchy onywey. Ha'e ye been tryin' onythin' in that line lately, Jess? But I suppose no', for Davie wis lukin' weel the last time I seen him. Tits! I'm jist jokin'! Ye'll be a baker yet! Keep a licht hert an' a licht haun', an' mind the sody, an' ye'll turn oot scones fit for angels. . . . My! but ye're drest the nicht, lass!" Mrs. Wallace exclaimed, as the young woman removed her jacket. "Whit did ye pey for that? A bonny penny, I'm thinkin'."

"You mean my blouse? I made it myself, aunt."

"Did ye? Weel, it's no' bad; no' bad," said Mrs. Wallace slowly. "I'm gled to see ye've no' pit ower mony falderals aboot it, like some o' the lasses ye see here on the Sawbath."

MRS. WALLACE AT HOME

Plain claes for plain folk—that's ma motto.
'Deed, ay ! Plain claes for——"

" I suppose you never cared about ribbons and things when you were a girl, Aunt Wallace ? "

" Eh ? Whit's that ye're sayin' ? Humph ! I've nae time for ony mair haverin'. I thocht ye said ye cam' early to help me."

" So I did. What can I do ? " asked the other, checking a smile.

" Ye can gang an' set the table in the paurLOUR. The cloth's laid, an' ye ken whaur to get the dishes—the best yins. Be canny wi' them, Jess. I'll be efter ye in twa meenits."

Jess departed to the parlour, and proceeded to lay the tea things, humming a merry tune to herself. She was in gay spirits, for less than an hour ago she had posted the money required to meet the bill due by David to Hardy & Son, the timber merchants. It had been a terribly anxious three months for the young wife, and she was only too well aware that her husband's affairs were still far from being in a sound condition ; but the first difficult steps in the direction of prosperity had been taken, and for the moment she allowed herself to rest and be thankful and glad, seeing the goal of her desire less distant, perhaps, than it really was. Hope carries a rare pair of field-glasses, and an occasional scrap of success is sufficient to keep them clean and bright.

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Mrs. Wallace entered the room, bearing two plates of scones, and paused, surveying her niece's handiwork.

"Mphm!" she said at last. "That'll dae. But did I no' tell ye Maister Ogilvy wis comin' to his tea?"

"Mr. Ogilvy?" Jess shook her head.

"Ay; Maister Ogilvy, the grocer, ye ken."

Mrs. Houston tried not to look surprised or amused. "Oh, yes," she said, and retired to the cupboard.

Her aunt's voice followed her. "Is there onythin' wrang in Maister Ogilvy comin' to his tea? Or is there onythin' *peeculiar*?"

"Of course not, Aunt Wallace," replied Jess from behind the door.

"Weel, dinna rattle ma guid dishes as if ye had the palsy. Ha'e ye no' got a' the dishes ye need yet?"

"Yes; here they are." And Jess came forth, her countenance abnormally grave, but rather flushed.

"Whit ails ye, Jess?"

"Nothing—nothing."

"Ye're maybe a wee thing surprised at Maister Ogilvy comin' to his tea?"

"Well, you see, I didn't know he was such a friend of yours, aunt."

"I didna say he wis. But I'm kin' o' vexed

MRS. WALLACE AT HOME

for the man," said Mrs. Wallace, half gently, half contemptuously. "He's aye complainin' aboot bad trade, an' that's a thing I canna thole in a man. An' yet he's no' a hard man. I wis passin' his shop the ither day, when a wean fell aff his doorstep wi' hauf-a-dizzen eggs she had jist bocht frae him, an' he was oot efter her afore ye cud say 'Jack Robison,' an' took her back to the shop, an' efter he had wiped awa' the maist o' the mess he gied her anither hauf-a-dizzen eggs, an' a wheen sweeties forbye, an' tell't her no' to let on to her mither that she had tummilt."

"That was good of him!" exclaimed Jess with enthusiasm.

"Oh, he whiles does things like that to weans, but he's a kin' o' greetin' buddy as a rule. An, I'm shair he needna be that, for he's naebody to keep but hissel', an' his business is no' near as bad as he mak's it oot to be."

"Has he never thought of getting married?" asked Jess, seriously. "He can't be so very old."

"Auld? He's no' auld ava'! He's no' muckle aulder nor masel'. But I doot he'll never get a wife, even if he ever wants yin."

"And what made you ask him to tea?" the niece inquired boldly.

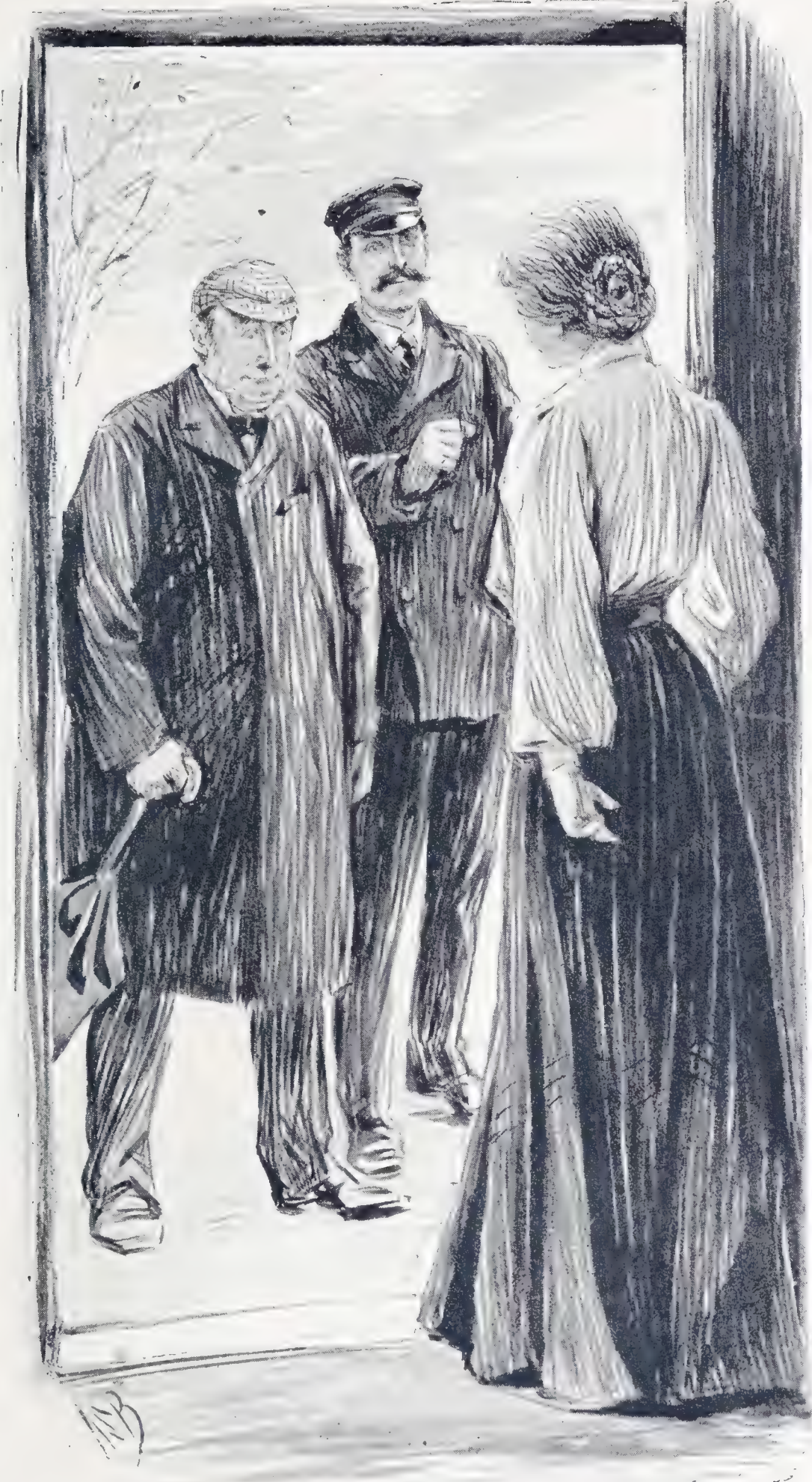
If the query contained any insinuation, Mrs. Wallace failed to perceive it. "Weel, as I tell't ye afore, I'm kin' o' vexed for him,

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an' when I wis in his shop the day I wis mair vexed nor or'nar'. Ye see, he bides at the back o' the shop, an' when I gaed in the day, he cam' furrit, unco rid i' the face an' confused-like. An' afore he had hauf served me, an' awfu' reek an' smell begood to come frae the back room. 'Mercy me! Whit in creation's that?' I cries. 'Aw, never heed it, Mistress Wallace,' he says, tryin' to lauch. 'Never heed it?' says I. Man, I'm near stuffocatit!' 'I'm rale sorry. But I can assure ye there's naethin' wrang—at least, no' seriously wrang,' he says as if he wis ashamed. 'But there's somethin' burnin',' says I. But he jist shook his heid. 'Are ye daft?' I cries, 'Awa' an' pit it oot.' But he gi'ed anither puir lauch an' says, says he, 'Dinna get alarmed, Mistress Wallace. It's jist some soup I wis tryin' to mak' for ma dinner.' 'Soup!' says I. 'Soup! It smells liker singein' hair an' caunnle ends.' 'Deed, ay, an' I doot it'll taste the same,' he says wi' a groan. 'I'm jist seeck o' life, Mistress Wallace!' An' then it cam' oot that auld Mistress Neil that's cleaned his bit room an' cookit his meals for twinty an' mair years wis lyin' badly, cryin' oot that she wud dee if onybody else got her place, an' so Maister Ogilvy wis tryin' to dae her wark hissel'."

"Poor man!" said Jess.

"Mistress Neil's been badly for a week, an'



“ ‘How are you, Mr. Ogilvy?’ said Mrs. Houston in her friendliest fashion.”—PAGE 81



“The Laddie that brocht the messages.”—PAGE 97

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he tell't me he wis that tired o' eatin' cauld things oot o' tins this cauld weather that he thocht he wud mak' hissel' a bowl o' soup the day; but everythin' gaed wrang, an'—weel, Jess, that's the reason I askit him to his tea. An' Davie an' him'll be here afore we're ready for them, if we're no' smairt. Come awa' to the kitchen till I learn ye to fry ham an' eggs fit for angels."

The two men arrived together, having met on the road, and Jess was despatched from the kitchen to admit them, bearing instructions regarding the wiping of boots on the outer door-mat.

"You gang in first," whispered Mr. Ogilvy bashfully as the door opened.

"Na na. You're the stranger," returned David with a courteous shove.

"How are you, Mr. Ogilvy?" said Mrs. Houston in her friendliest fashion. "Davie, be sure and clean your boots," she added quickly to her husband.

"I'm weel, thenk ye," replied Mr. Ogilvy, taking a share of the door-mat. "Are ye keepin' pretty middlin' yersel'?"

"Yes, thank you. Now, come away in out of the cold."

They entered the lobby, disposed of their coats and caps, and followed her into the bright parlour, the joiner pushing the grocer before him.

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“Come over to the fire, Mr. Ogilvy,” said Jess hospitably. “Won’t you have the easy-chair?”

“Aw, thenk ye. Ony chair’ll dae—jist ony chair,” returned Mr. Ogilvy, wiping his brow with an enormous handkerchief and rubbing his hands in a nervous way.

“Gang furrit, man, an’ tak’ the chair,” cried David genially. He had known Ogilvy all his life, and it was impossible to keep up any formality. Jess, however, had only met him in the way of business, and she would probably have felt shy and tried less to make him feel at home, had it not been for her aunt’s recent remarks. So, having informed him that her aunt would appear presently, she did her utmost to put him at his ease, though, judging from the manner in which he continued to sit on the extreme edge of the easy-chair and repeatedly applied his handkerchief to his forehead, she could hardly be said to have succeeded brilliantly.

Her husband came to the rescue at last with the not very original inquiry :—

“An’ hoo’s trade wi’ ye?”

“Trade? Deplorable — jist deplorable! Never seen onythin’ like it,” said the grocer, shaking his head gloomily, but seating himself a little more comfortably in his chair. “Ye read a heap o’ stories i’ the papers aboot the

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Depression o' Trade, but if thae writin' chaps wants to ken what depression really is, they sud try a proveesion shop in Kinlochan. Depression isna the word for it ! ”

“ Och, it's no' as bad as a' that,” observed the joiner with a laugh.

“ Ah, David, ye're weel aff at the jinerin',” returned Mr. Ogilvy sadly. “ Ye're aye busy. But luk at me ! I sit—onywey, I staun'—at the receipt o' custom, as it were, for' oors thegither, an' whiles I never turn a copper. The ither day—Tuesday, I think it was—there was naebody cam' ower ma door-step frae twal' o'clock noon till three p.m., but twa weans. Yin was a laddie speirin' for a bit string for his draygon ; the ither was a lassie wantin' change for a penny. D'ye ca' that trade ? ”

“ But it's not always so bad, Mr. Ogilvy,” put in Mrs. Houston.

“ Maybe no' jist as bad,” he allowed grudgingly. “ But trade's no' what it used to be. Folk never used to get a' their proveesions frae the toon ; an' there was nae cairts and vans comin' ten mile to poach on ma preserves, as it were. But noo—oh, it's jist deplorable, jist deplorable ! Ay——”

He was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Wallace with a huge dish of ham and eggs, which she deposited on the table before taking any notice of her guests. “ Jess,” she whispered

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to her niece, “awa’ an’ bring ben the tea an’ toast. . . . Weel, Davie, hoo’s things? Gled to hear ye’re busy. . . . Weel, Maister Ogilvy, I suppose trade’s waur nor ever. But I dinna think ye sud mak’ sic a lamentation aboot it in the hoose o’ yer best customer. Eh? Ha! ha! ha!”

“Aw, Mistress Wallace!” murmured the grocer, with a feeble smile of apology. “Nae offence, I hope.”

“Haud yer tongue, man, an’ draw in yer chair. Come awa’, Jess, my lass. David, tak’ the heid o’ the table an’ ask a blessin’. . . . Noo, help the ham an’ eggs. If they’re no’ guid, ye can blame it on Maister Ogilvy.”

“Ye wud aye ha’e yer bit joke, Mistress Wallace,” said the guest, beginning to brighten under the cheerful influences about him.

“Sugar an’ cream?”

“Thenk ye, thenk ye. As I was observin’——”

“Ha’e!” interrupted Houston, handing him a plate piled with ham and a couple of eggs.

“Aw, jist the hauf o’ that, please, jist the hauf o’ that,” said Mr. Ogilvy modestly.

“Come awa’, man!” urged Houston.

“Ay, come awa’, Maister Ogilvy. Hoo can ye expec’ trade to be flourishin’ when ye winna eat yer ain proveesions?” added the hostess with a chuckle.

David laughed also as he selected some tit-

MRS. WALLACE AT HOME

bits for his wife. "'Deed, Ogilvy, ye've got to dae as ye're bid in this hoose."

"Ay, an' naebody kens that better nor David," remarked Mrs. Wallace smartly.

Whereupon every one laughed heartily, including Mrs. Houston, who, however, first glanced at her husband to make sure that his feelings had not been hurt.

The meal proceeded, and altogether it was a very pleasant one. Mr. Ogilvy, who had been furnishing, finished his ham and eggs, and, after a deal of pressing, consented to take a second helping.

"Jist a wee tate," he said diffidently. "Jist a sma' sensation. It's rale nice ham," he remarked to Mrs. Wallace. Then, noticing a twinkle in her eye, "I mean it's rale nice cookit. In fac', I micht say, I never tastit ham near as nice cookit, Mistress Wallace."

At this point David winked guardedly at his wife, who attempted to look severe, but smiled.

"As for yer scones," said the grocer a little later, "I'm no' exaggeratin' when I tell ye they're the finest I ever encountered in a' ma born days!"

Such enthusiastic language from the mouth of Mr. Ogilvy was so unprecedented that a solemn pause ensued for several seconds.

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“I’m shair I’m gled ye like the scones,” returned Mrs. Wallace, recovering herself and breaking the silence, which would otherwise have been broken by a snigger from David. “Is Mistress Neil no’ a guid haun’ at the bakin’ ? ”

“I thocht she was until the nicht,” came the gallant reply, whereat Houston gave his wife the gentlest of gentle kicks under the table.

“I doot ye’re an unco blether, Maister Ogilvy,” said the hostess with a dry smile.

Mr. Ogilvy was suddenly abashed, realizing that he had allowed the unaccustomed comfort and cheer to carry him away.

Jess came to the rescue. “Have you heard how poor Mrs. Neil is to-night ? ” she inquired.

“Weel, Mistress Houston, I seen the doctor jist afore I left the shop, an’ he said she was a lump better, an’ wud maybe be back at her wark on Monday. But she’s gettin’ auld, ye ken, an’ I doot she’s no’ lang for this life, puir buddy ! ”

“Wud ye no’ be better to get some ither yin in her place ? ” asked David.

“No’ as lang’s she’s leevin’. She cudna thole it. An’ I dinna ken onybody in Kinlochan that wud be carin’ aboot the job.”

“Of course, there’s *twa* weys o’ gettin’ a hoose-keeper,” said David teasingly.

For an instant the grocer looked puzzled ;

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then he took a long drink from his empty cup, and tried to look as if he had not heard the remark at all.

“Are ye a’ satisfied?” The hostess glanced round the table and rose. “Jess,” she said briskly, “you an’ me ’ll clear the dishes, an’ Maister Ogilvy an’ David can ha’e a smoke.”

“Och, we’ll jist wait an’ ha’e a smoke in the kitchen efter ye’re through wi’ the dishes,” said David, who had never yet lit his pipe in Mrs. Wallace’s parlour.

“I’m tellin’ ye, ye can smoke here,” she assured him. “Yer pipes ’ll be naethin’ to the ceegaurs o’ ma ludgers in the simmer. Ye can smell the ceegaurs yet. I doot they wis chape yins. So ye can smoke yersel’s black i’ the face, an’ maybe the new smell ’ll kill the auld yin. Draw in yer chairs to the fire.”

Aunt and niece speedily cleared the table and retired to the kitchen to wash up, for the former had a theory that the longer a dish was left soiled, the more difficult it was to cleanse.

The two men drew their chairs toward the hearth, filled and lit their pipes, and for ten minutes puffed in solemn silence.

“It’s a bonny paurlour this,” Mr. Ogilvy ventured, after he had taken in every detail of the room, which was a model of orderliness and cleanliness, if solidly furnished and primly arranged.

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“It’s a’ that,” returned David agreeably. “But when I come in I’m aye feart at first that I dae the wrang thing. I yinst knockit ower a vaze, an’ though it’s twa year syne, I can hear the smash it made on the fender yet. It’s no’ a nice thing to knock ower a vaze belongin’ to the aunt o’ the lass ye’re coortin’.”

“I daursay that’s true. It pits ye in what ye micht ca’ an awkward poseetion. At least, I preshume that the poseetion wudna be a’the-gither pleesant, though it’s no’ for me to say, seein’ I’m no’ vera fameeliar wi’ the paurLOURS o’ weemen folk.”

“Ah, but it was gey awkward, I tell ye. But I may say that Mistress Wallace never referred to the vaze efter that nicht, no’ but what she referred kin’ o’ freely to it at the time. If it hadna been for Jess I wud ha’e said there was mair talk nor a dizzen vazes was worth.”

“Ye—ye’re weel aff wi’ yer wife, David,” observed the grocer, staring at the fire.

“Ay,” said David, briefly but certainly not coldly.

“Ye’ll be gey cheery alang at Hazel Cottage thae lang nichts,” continued the older man. “It’s a—a rale fine thing to ha’e a—agreeable comp’ny, as it were. Eh?”

“Ay,” said David softly, pushing down the threads of glowing tobacco with a hardened forefinger.

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“An’—an’ yer wife’s gey weel aff wi’ her aunt,” said the other after some hesitation.

“Ay, Mistress Wallace is jist a fine auld wuman,” said the joiner heartily.

“She’s no’ that auld.”

“I didna mean that exac’ly. But, of course, she’s a guid bit aulder nor Jess an’ me. I wudna say but what she’s jist at her best.”

“In her prime, as it were.”

“Jist that.”

“Weel, I’m shair there’s naebody I like better to see comin’ ower ma door-step,” said Mr. Ogilvy warmly, “even if it’s for nae mair nor a penny’s worth.”

“Ye’ve kent her langer nor me.”

“Och, ay! she’s been a reg’lar customer o’ mines since she cam’ to Kinlochan, and I’m prood to say I’ve never had a complaint frae her, except yinst, an’ that was when I sent her dog biscuits in mistake for abernethies; an’ it was the laddie in the shop that done it, because she had cuffed him for roarin’ ‘Scots wha ha’e!’ at her door instead o’ ringin’ the bell like an or’nar’ Christian. But that was the only complaint I ever had, David.” And the grocer proceeded to relight his pipe.

“That’s vera satisfactory, I’m shair,” said David.

“I think it is,” said Mr. Ogilvy, puffing

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with the air of a man who is quite pleased with himself. "I was rale prood to be invitet to ma tea the nicht. Nae doot I lost a bit custom shuttin' up ma shop earlier nor usual; but what's a shillin' or twa when ye're enjeyin' yersel'?"

"Mphm," murmured the younger man, checking a laugh.

After a considerable pause the grocer resumed the conversation.

"I was gaun to gi'e ye a hint, David, aboot a job that'll likely be stairtit efter the New Year. Are ye near feenished up at Arden?"

"It'll be twa-three weeks yet afore I'm through. It's a big job."

"The bigger the better! Weel, the job I was gaun to tell ye aboot is a boat-hoose that Mr. Colman wants built—nane o' yer wee boat hooses, but a big yin to haud three or fower boats, an' it's to be done up in the best style."

"Hoo dae ye get to hear o' things?" exclaimed David, sitting up in his chair.

"Aw, never you mind aboot that! But if ye want the job, tak' ma advice an' gang to *Mistress* Colman first. *She's* the manager o' the establishment. But she's a kind leddy, an'—an' ye can mention that I sent ye, if ye like."

"Ach, I see it noo!" cried Houston. "It

MRS. WALLACE AT HOME

was her wee lassie that ye pickit oot frae amang the horses' feet at——”

“Whisht, man, whisht! That's naethin' to dae wi' 't,” cried Mr. Ogilvy, confused. “Jist you tak' ma hint, and dinna tell onybody.”

“'Deed, I'm greatly obleeged to ye, but——”

Just then the aunt and niece entered the parlour, and the conversation became general. The grocer expanded wonderfully, and it was soon discovered that he was the possessor of a stock of old and chiefly weird local legends, with which he regaled the company until Mrs. Wallace started up and informed her visitors that they could not remain in her house another minute. Without feeling in the least offended, but in the best of spirits, they shortly afterwards took their departure, David carrying a lantern, for the night was dark.

“Davie,” whispered Jess, as they went through the garden-gate, “tell Mr. Ogilvy you want him to come to his tea to-morrow night.”

“'Deed, ay, lass. That was weel thocht o'!” he returned, and passed the invitation on to the grocer.

“Thenk ye, thenk ye,” said Mr. Ogilvy, coughing loudly. “I'll be jist *de*lighted. Thenk ye, thenk ye!”

When they had parted with him, opposite his shop, David began to laugh softly.

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“What is it ? ” Jess asked.

“Ogilvy’s efter yer Aunt Wallace.”

“Oh, Davie ! I—I believe he is.”

“Has he ony chance, think ye, Jess ? ”

“I’m afraid not. Poor Mr. Ogilvy ! Aunt won’t marry again.”

“A wumman’s got to be askit first, onywey. But I wud like to see him weel lukit efter, for he’s a dacent man and a guid freen’ to you an’ me, lass.” And David told his wife of the new work in prospect.

“That’s fine ! ” she cried softly. “Oh, Davie, it was such a relief to get that awful bill off our minds to-day ! Wasn’t it ? ”

“’Deed, ay,” he assented lightly.

“But there’s a lot to be done yet,” she said seriously after a moment. “I mean, we must keep it up, mustn’t we ? ” she added hastily, lest he should suspect more than she wanted him to know.

“Jist that,” he said gaily. “Dinna fash yersel’, dearie. We’re daein’ fine. I only wish Dobbie wud send that gless I ordered the ither day.”

“Has it not come ? ” she asked in sudden alarm.

“Oh, it’ll likely be here the morn. But I was thinkin’ o’ takin’ the day to gang an’ see the Duke’s chrysanthemums, an’ I thocht ye micht like to come wi’ me.”

MRS. WALLACE AT HOME

“That would be grand, but—but——”

“But what?”

“Shouldn’t you be at Arden to-morrow?”

“I’m waitin’ on the gless.”

“But there’s a lot of odd jobs waiting.”

“Weel, dearie, if I dinna gang to see the Duke’s chrysanthemums the morn, I’ll maybe no’ manage anither day. An’ it’s time ye had a day aff, Jess.”

She spoke little more during the remainder of the walk, but her husband chatted cheerfully. An ugly presentiment assailed her, and she could not get quit of it. She was convinced that she—she did not intend that David should see it first—would find a letter in a business envelope under the door of the cottage, deposited there by Old Angus, who usually waited in the shop for the evening post.

* * * * *

David, whistling merrily, turned his key in the door of Hazel Cottage.

“Did you shut the gate properly, Davie?” she said, trembling.

“Ay. But I’ll gang back an’ see,” he returned obligingly, and ran down the path, swinging the lantern.

Jess pushed the door partly open, bent down and felt over the triangle of flooring.

Her fingers closed on a letter. “Oh,

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Davie ! ” she sighed, and crushed it within her blouse.

* * * * *

“ Jess, lass, ye’re lukin’ wearit,” he said tenderly a little later.

“ Oh, I’m all right,” she replied, trying to smile.

“ Ye’ll be the better o’ a day aff the morn. An’ I ken ye’ll enjey seein’ the Duke’s chrysanthemums. My ! if I had jist the time and money, Jess ! ”

“ Keep hoping, Davie,” she said very gently. “ But I—I don’t think I’ll come with you tomorrow. I think I’ll go to the town instead. You see, it’s a long time since——”

Her husband looked so disappointed that her will nearly gave way. “ I wantit ye wi’ me,” he said slowly. “ But I daursay ye’re needin’ things frae the toon, an’, as ye say, it’s a guid while since ye was there. I suppose ye’ll be hame in time for Ogilvy.”

“ Oh, yes. You’re not vexed, are you, Davie ? ”

“ Na, na, ma dear. I believe ye wud come wi’ me if ye hadna somethin’ important to dae in the toon. Eh, Jess ? ”

“ That’s just it. And maybe you’ll ask me another time.”

“ That I wull, lass ! ”

“ And you’ll bring home some flowers if you

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can. I like to see our own ones growing.” Then she added very casually: “I might as well look in at Dobbie’s and tell them to send the glass on at once.”

“Ay; jist dae that, Jess.” And, with a laugh, he added; “Ye can tell them ye’re ma pairtner!”

V

THE GENTLEMAN FROM GLASGOW

“**A**N’ a botle o’ furniture polish,” continued Mrs. Wallace.

“A botle o’ furniture polish,” repeated the grocer, moistening the point of a stumpy pencil and applying it to the dog-eared page of a dilapidated day-book.

“Ay. An’ see an’ no’ send a botle o’ ‘Complexion Cream’ the wey ye done the last time.”

“Complexion Cream?”

“Jist that! That wis whit ye sent the last time—it’s a while syne—I ordered furniture polish. I preshume it wisna your fau’t, Maister Ogilvy, for I perceived an evil smile, as the stories say, on the face o’ the laddie that brocht the messages. But it wisna an evil smile, nor ony ither kin’ o’ smile, when I got the haud o’ him the next mornin’. Na!”

“Oh, Mistress Wallace,” exclaimed Mr. Ogilvy, in unaffected distress, “I’m vexed ye was insultit

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by thon laddie. He was jist a wee deevil ! I'm gled I sent him awa'. 'Deed, I wish I had sent him awa' shinner. In fac', I wish I had never seen his impiddent face ! I was near dementit wi' his pranks an' tricks. He thocht naethin' o' pittin' saut in siftit sugar, an' yin time he mixed up pepper in puir auld Maister Bowie's snuff, an' near kilt the puir buddy wi' sneezin' an' greetin'. An' at the New Year, what dae ye think he done to Mistress Mason's paircel—the biggest order I'd had for mony a lang day—what dae ye think he done ? ”

“ I canna say.”

“ Aweel, I sud explain that the paircel contained, as it were, a heap o' seasonable luxuries ; in fac', it was maistly composed o' luxuries—a' sorts o' guid things an' sweet things, ye ken.”

“ Mphm.”

“ I'm tellin' ye aboot the luxuries so as ye may perceive the full meanin' o' the wee deevil's prank.”

“ I see.”

“ Weel, the paircel was sent awa', an' the day efter Mistress Mason's servant lass cam' in to the shop an' said I wud get the paircel back as shin as I liket to send for it. An' she said, forbye, that I needna tell the laddie to ca' for further orders. An' wi' that she walkit oot the shop, leavin' me completely dumfoonert. But there was naethin'

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for it but to get the paircel an' solve the mystery, as it were."

"An' whit wis the mystery, as it wis ?" inquired Mrs. Wallace, a little impatiently.

"The mystery," said Mr. Ogilvy solemnly, "was a lairge-size botle o' castor-ile wi' 'A Happy New Year' written on it. An' Mistress Mason hadna ordered the ile."

Mrs. Wallace chuckled. "I forgi'e the laddie, I forgi'e the laddie!" she cried.

"I didna dae that, Mistress Wallace," said the grocer shortly. "But I gi'ed him a week's notice."

"It wis a peety to loss sic a smairt laddie," she remarked, still chuckling.

"He was ower smairt for me! He was that, I tell ye! An' I tell't him he was ower smairt for rinnin' *ma* messages—I tell't him that when I peyed him his wages for the last time. But he jist made a face at me an' gaed awa' lauchin' like to hurt hissel'. It was the Seturday nicht, an' when I had seen him aff the premises, I cam' back here, whaur I'm the noo, for to mak' up ma books. An' I made to sit doon on ma stool—the stool ye see there, Mistress Wallace—but the stool gaed birlin' awa'—an' I cam' doon wi' an awfu' crash on the floor. . . . I was thenkfu' there was nae customers in the shop. An' when I cam' to ma senses I discovered three nutmegs

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o' the vera best quality that the wee deevil had pitten ablow the legs o' ma stool—which accoontit for the accident, as it were. So, ye see——”

“An' ye can send hauf-a-pun' o' yer best ham,” interrupted Mrs. Wallace.

“Hauf-a-pun' o' the best ham,” repeated Mr. Ogilvy. “But what wey,” he suddenly asked, “did ye no' return the Complexion Cream, Mistress Wallace?”

“Weel, to tell ye the truth, I tried it on ma mahogany chiffoneer, an' the result wis first-rate, only the cream wis ower dear for frequent application, as it is said on the labbel. Ha'e ye doon the ham?”

“The ham is duly registered, Mistress Wallace. But I'm vexed aboot the——”

“An' ye micht send three o' yer best fresh eggs—jist three, mind ye.”

“Three best fresh eggs,” echoed Mr. Ogilvy, after re-moistening the point of his pencil.

“Ye sent fower the last time,” said Mrs. Wallace.

“Did I?” said the grocer, somewhat flustered.

“Ay, did ye! An' I didna want fower.”

“It's jist three in the book, Mistress Wallace.”

“Weel, the shinner ye mak' it fower, the better for yer profits.”

“Are—are ye shair it was fower ye got?”

“As shair's death! Man, dae ye think I wud

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cheat masel' oot the price o' an egg—at yin an' ten the dizzen ? ” she demanded severely, while Mr. Ogilvy perspired with his mental agony. “ I doot the laddie ye've got noo is nae better nor the yin we wis speakin' aboot, an' he hasna hauf the fun in him. He's jist wastin' yer substance, Maister Ogilvy, in a maist unexcitin' fashion, an'——”

“ Aw, the laddie's honest, I can tell ye. Ay ; he's honest.”

“ Weel, he's no' ready to quit the schule, if he canna tell three frae fower. An egg's an egg ! ”

“ Ye never said a truer word, Mistress Wallace, but——”

“ An' I'll tak' a pun' o' bakin' sody.”

“ A pun o' bakin' sody,” he repeated aloud, but to himself he groaned : “ Oh, me ! Can I no' send her an extra egg noo an' then wi'oot her detectin' it ? ”

Mrs. Wallace picked up her umbrella and prepared to depart.

“ Wull that be a' the day ? ” the grocer asked in a tone which suggested regret at her going.

“ That's the lot. An' see an' tie up the three eggs yersel', an' no' trust to yer laddie till he's better up in the coontin'.”

“ I'll attend to that,” returned Mr. Ogilvy, heaving a sigh. “ Are ye for Mistress Houston's noo ? ” he inquired, adding, “ There was a

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strange young man in the shop jist afore ye cam' in, speirin' the road to Hazel Cottage. I had it on ma tongue to tell ye, but——”

“A young man? Whit like a young man?”

“Aw, a weel-dressed, genteel-lukin' young man. He cam' aff the twa o'clock boat. He was that polite, I thocht at first he micht be in the jam and jeely line, or maybe traivellin' for yin o' thae new patent infants' foods, ye ken. Thae infants' foods is jist——”

“Nae doot! But whit wis he wantin' at Hazel Cottage?”

“I canna say, Mistress Wallace. I tell't him David Houston—if it was him he was wantin'—was awa' workin' at Maister Colman's new boat-hoose an' wudna likely be at hame; an' if he had ony business wi' David, he micht leave a message at the shop wi' auld Angus.”

“An' whit did he say?”

“He jist said he was greatly obleeged, an' gaed awa'.”

“I wunner whit he was wantin',” muttered Mrs. Wallace. “There wis a young man cam' aff the twa o'clock boat yin day last week, an' speirt at the pier the road to Hazel Cottage, but he never gaed there.”

“That was queer,” said Mr. Ogilvy. “It canna ha'e been the same young man, for he wudna ha'e needit to speir twice. But dootless

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some of the merchants in the city'll ha'e been hearin' aboot the big jobs that David's gettin' an' they'll be wantin' to share in his prosperity, as it——"

"That'll be it. The wudd merchants an' ithers'll be wantin' to dae business wi' him. I maun say that mairrage has been the makin' o' David Houston—though I wudna tell Jess that."

"She's a clever lass, yer niece, Mistress Wallace," remarked the grocer. "I'm thinkin' she tak's efter her aunt," he added with an effort which brought the perspiration to his brow.

"Eh ?" she demanded.

"It—it was jist a sma' compliment, as it were," he stammered.

"Humph ! Compliment ! We'll be hearin' next that ye're takin' lessons in dancin' an' deportment. 'Deed, Maister Ogilvy, ye fairly surprise me whiles ! Ye seem to be renewin' yer youth like the eagle. Ha—ha !"

Poor Mr. Ogilvy certainly did not look much like an eagle as he mumbled sadly : "Oh, Mistress Wallace, if—if ye jist kent ma feelins—ma inmost fee——"

"Are ye no' weel ?" she exclaimed.

The grocer gave her a look that would have melted a flint. "Pheesically I ha'e nae infirmity, but——"

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“ I near forgot to order a bit o’ emery-paper.”

“ Emery-paper ? ”

“ Ay, emery paper, man ! ”

“ Of course, of course,” said Mr. Ogilvy recovering himself. “ Emery paper,” and he moistened his pencil.

“ Weel, I maun gang. Guid-day to ye, Maister Ogilvy. Mind it’s *three* eggs ye’re to send.” She left the shop and turned in the direction of Hazel Cottage.

For a minute Mr. Ogilvy watched her from behind a pile of wooden cheeses in the window. Then he turned away with a groan, knocking over a large pot of gooseberry jam. Surveying the mess at his feet, he sighed :

“ Samuel Ogilvy, ye’re jist an eediot. Ye’ve nae mair sense nor that puir jaur o’ jam.”

* * * * *

When, about half-past two, the bell rang, Jess, who had just settled down to an afternoon’s baking, murmured impatiently, “ If it’s that Miss Perk again, I’ve a good mind not to let her in. She’s always coming when I’m busy. If I only knew it was her I’d let her ring. I’ll wait a minute, anyway.”

She waited till the bell rang a third time, and then, without removing the flour from her arms, she went to the door, saying to herself, “ She’ll surely see I’m busy.”



“Samuel Ogilvy, ye’re jist an eediot, ye’ve nae mair sense nor that puir jaur o’ jam.”—PAGE 104



“It was an utter rout as far as Mr. Dobbie was concerned.”—PAGE 115

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But the ringer was not the person whose advent Mrs. Houston dreaded. On the doorstep stood a man of perhaps thirty, fashionably dressed, gloved and with a hothouse flower in his button-hole.

“Don’t you remember me ? ” he asked, smiling and holding out his hand.

The flush on her face deepened, and for a moment she hesitated. “Mr. Dobbie,” she said, shyly.

“Yes ; but won’t you shake hands—er—Mrs. Houston ? ”

Jess dusted her hand on her white apron and gave it to him, though not willingly. In spite of a kindness recently received from this man, she wished her visitor had, after all, been the troublesome Miss Perk.

“You have a pretty place here,” he observed, eyeing her averted face in an amused fashion. “One can believe in spring in your garden.”

“Yes,” she returned, feeling that she was behaving and looking foolishly, “the snowdrops and crocuses are doing very well.”

“What about the roses,” he said softly, with a glance at her face. “And the lilies,” he added, his eyes falling to her arms.

“Oh, we don’t have them for a while yet,” she answered him simply.

“I thought *you* would have them all the year round.”

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“We don’t have any forced flowers, Mr. Dobbie.”

“I can see that.”

But his meaning was fortunately lost on her, and presently he smacked his gloved hands together, stamped his pointed shoes on the step, and, with an affected shiver, said :—

“Yes, Mrs. Houston, the garden is a pretty place, but at this season of the year it’s a cold place for talking in. Aren’t you afraid of getting a chill, standing at the door ? ”

Jess shook her head. She felt awkward, and wished he would go away.

“You are not very hospitable,” he said, with a light laugh. “Don’t you think you might invite me inside for a few minutes ? I came from Glasgow to-day specially to see you—to have a little chat on business, you know.”

“I beg your pardon,” said Jess nervously. “Will you come into the parlour, Mr. Dobbie ? ”

“Will you walk into my parlour ? ” he quoted, with an air of originality, as he followed her. “ ’Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever I did spy,” he continued on entering the room.

“Will you sit down, Mr. Dobbie ? ” she asked gravely, placing a chair near the fire.

“Don’t look so serious, Mrs. Houston,” he said, stretching his hands and feet toward the grate. “We needn’t talk business unless you like.”

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"But you've come from Glasgow," she began, and halted lamely.

"Won't you sit down yourself, Mrs. Houston?" he inquired politely, rising.

"No—no, thank you."

"How shy she is!" he said to himself, resuming his seat. Then aloud: "I have come from Glasgow to see you, because you have not come from Kinlochan to see me."

"I—didn't know you wanted to see me, Mr. Dobbie. I thought the—the business was settled for three months. It's only five weeks since you were—since you were so kind to me."

He smiled in a way that many of his town lady friends considered quite fascinating. "I've been hoping you would call as you promised—well, perhaps it was not a definite promise—to let me know how affairs were progressing. You gave me so much of your confidence during your one call, that I think I was almost justified in expecting another. Can't you understand how deeply I was disappointed, Mrs. Houston?"

"Perhaps I should have let you know how things were going on," said Jess somewhat coldly. "But they were going on well, and I knew I could manage your account in the three months, and so I didn't see the need of writing. I haven't been in Glasgow since the day you were so kind to me about the glass."

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"But you will be coming soon? You must find it rather dull here in the dead season."

"No."

"But it must be appallingly quiet."

"It is quiet."

"I think you said you were brought up in the city, Mrs. Houston."

"Yes."

"And don't you weary for a little gaiety now and then?"

"No."

"Do you mean to tell me that you are quite contented with life here?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Would you not prefer to have less work and worry, Mrs. Houston?"

"No."

Her curt answers rather amused than annoyed him. "I wish I were so easily pleased," he sighed. "But you can bring some pleasure into my unsatisfactory existence by coming to see me, say, this day week."

"Oh, I can't, Mr. Dobbie."

"This day week," he repeated gently. "You owe me something, don't you?"

"The money will be paid on the day you said," she replied, feeling at a loss.

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“Is that all you think of me?”

“I cannot thank you any more than I’ve done,” she said, praying that he might depart.

“Do you know that I came to see you last week?” he asked suddenly.

“It was you? I heard that some one had asked the way to the cottage. But I didn’t think——”

“I found the cottage, but I noticed your husband was busy in his garden—which was more to his own credit than to that of his banking account, I’m afraid—so I passed the gate reluctantly. I don’t suppose you would have welcomed me in the presence of your husband.”

Jess paled slightly, but held her peace.

“Mr. Houston has no idea of our little secret?” he continued. “You are quite certain he suspects nothing? . . . It’s just as well, for he might take it badly if he knew.”

“There’s nothing wrong,” she gasped.

“Oh, no,” he answered lightly. “Nothing seriously wrong. Still, you know, a man doesn’t like to find out that he is being *managed*. You understand? And, as you told me, you are very anxious to manage Mr. Houston’s affairs without his knowing what is going on. It’s a pretty idea, but apt to lead to trouble. A woman can take too much upon herself. Even an incapable man has his dignity.”

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“I—I don’t understand.” At the moment she felt that she *had* taken too much upon herself.

“Well, I’ll put it plainly, Mrs. Houston,” he said, rising slowly and turning his back to the fire. “Suppose some one told Mr. Houston that his wife knew his financial position—pardon the long words—and concealed it from him.”

“Oh!”

“Suppose some one told him that his wife was treating him like a child. Would he like it? Would he appreciate her self-sacrifice?”

“But no one knows but you. I had to tell you, Mr. Dobbie. You were so kind, and I was desperate that day. . . . But nobody knows but you about David.” Speaking her husband’s name seemed to strengthen her. She looked him straight in the face.

He hesitated, but only for an instant. “Nobody knows but myself. . . . And nobody else need know,” he said deliberately.

Jess felt herself turning cold; her hand tightened on the back of the chair she had been holding during the past five minutes. “Why—*why* do you say that?” she asked in a whisper.

He smiled. “Did it frighten you. . . . Jessie?”

“How dare you?” she exclaimed.

Still smiling, he took a step forward.

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"Don't move!" she cried, gripping the back of the chair with both hands.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear girl. I shan't move. I wouldn't spoil the picture you make on any account. But I want to talk to you. Why are you angry? Let's be friends."

The look of contempt on her white face stung him to the quick.

"Then I'll leave you in the meantime, but this day week you'll come to my office and persuade me to make it up," he said harshly. . . "Won't you?" he asked with a sudden change of tone. "Won't you?" he repeated, this time in the appealing notes of a lover.

Jess made no sound.

"Why not?" he inquired softly.

She remained silent, and he could no longer endure her eyes upon him.

"Good-bye just now—er—Mrs. Houston," he said, taking his hat and gloves from the table. "I hope we'll have a pleasanter chat this day week. At what hour may I expect you? . . . *What on earth are you doing?*"

Jess, still holding the chair, had slipped back to the door and turned the key.

"So you don't want me to go yet?" said Mr. Dobbie with an uncomfortable laugh.

Mrs. Houston moistened her dry lips. "You must wait till David comes home," she said quietly.

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For the moment her words literally took his breath away. But only for the moment. "Are you mad?" he demanded. "You'll make me lose my steamer, and it's the last to-night."

She paid no attention.

"I was only joking, Mrs. Houston. You've made me feel an awful ass," he said presently, trying to laugh. "Let us part in peace, as the hymn says."

Her face, if anything, grew more determined.

"You must wait, Mr. Dobbie, till I have explained matters to Mr. Houston."

"You intend to tell him everything!"

"Everything."

The man considered, and when he spoke again, his smile was ugly. "Do you wish to make your husband a bankrupt, Mrs. Houston?"

"You wouldn't——" she began.

"Would *you*?"

"You said three months, Mr. Dobbie."

"Did I?"

"Oh, you—you——"

He, knowing the situation was his, advanced towards her, saying politely, "Kindly open the door."

She turned the key mechanically.

"Till this day week," he said pleasantly, as he passed into the lobby. "*Hullo!*"

"Hullo, yersel'!" said the aggrieved voice

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of Mrs. Wallace, who had just come from the kitchen, having entered the cottage by the back door. "Whit's ado? Wha's this?"

"It's all right, Aunt Wallace," said Jess, trying to steady her voice as she followed her unwelcome visitor from the parlour.

"Guidsake! lassie, ye luk as if ye had been seein' a ghaist? Wha's this?" Mrs. Wallace demanded in a loud whisper, pointing to Mr. Dobbie, who was struggling with the patent lock on the outer door.

"Oh, never mind, aunt, never mind," murmured her niece, ready to collapse.

Mrs. Wallace looked sharply at Jess. "Is he a freen o' yours?" she asked quickly. "Is he a freen o' Davie's?"

"No, no!" said the young woman wildly.

"Sich bein' the case, he's nae freen o' mines," muttered Mrs. Wallace. "Young man!" she suddenly roared, "quit fiddlin' wi' the sneck o' that door, an' pey attention to me."

"Confound this lock!" grunted Mr. Dobbie, with another wrench at the handle.

"Bad language 'll no' help ye," cried Mrs. Wallace.

"Who's the old party?" he exclaimed angrily, turning to Jess.

"Auld pairty!" the aunt almost shrieked. "I'll auld pairty ye, ye tailor's dummy! Ye penny masher! Ye——"

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“Aunt, aunt!” protested Mrs. Houston.

“Haud yer tongue, lassie! I’m jist beginnin’. Whit has the man stolen, Jess?”

“Oh, nothing, nothing!”

“I’m gled to hear ye caught him in time. But I’ll pit the polis on his track onywey. . . Weel, Maister Burgular, whit ha’e ye got to say for yersel’? Eh?”

White with wrath, the glass merchant turned on her. “Show me how to open this cursed door, or——”

“Whisht, man! Ye’re bad enough wi’oot sweerin’.”

“Aunt Wallace, for my sake let him go,” whispered Jess.

“Let him gang? Nae fears! Wait till Davie comes hame, an’ he’ll mak’ collops o’ this braw bit o’ mankind. *I’m* no’ feart for him. I’ll stab him wi’ ma umburella as shin as luk at him.”

The enraged man spoke again. “Do you know who I am?” he roared.

“Wha?” said Mrs. Wallace.

“My name is Dobbie.”

“I’m mair curious to ken whit yer natur’ is.”

“And I’ll tell you now that Mrs. Houston has foolishly compromised herself——”

“Whit?” For a brief space the elderly woman hesitated. Then she strode forward and struck him over the head with her umbrella,

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splitting his bowler hat and crushing it over his eyes. "That's yin for *you*!" she cried.

At that moment he succeeded in opening the door.

"Mr. Houston will go bankrupt for this!" he yelled. "I'll show him no mercy."

"An' ye'll get nane either!" cried Mrs. Wallace, making a dash at him. "*Yin! . . . twa! . . . three! . . . fower!*" And she rushed down the garden path after him, belabouring him with her umbrella till it broke at the handle. It was an utter rout so far as Mr. Dobbie was concerned.

"I doot I've been whit the gentry ca' vulgar," she panted as she returned to the cottage.

She found her niece on the verge of fainting, and made speed to soothe and comfort her both physically and mentally.

"Jess, ma dear," she said, when the young woman had partially recovered, "I doot ye'll ha'e to trust yer auld auntie. Ye canna dae everythin' yersel'. Naebody can. Dinna mak' a lang story aboot it, but jist tell me whit I can dae to help ye."

* * * * *

"I ken ye've done yer best," said Mrs. Wallace a little later. "An' ye'll dae better yet, lass," she added. "I'll keep it a secret to please ye,

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but I'm feart ye're takin' ower big a responsi-beelity."

"But it's only for a few months now, Aunt Wallace," Jess pleaded. "I was so proud to think I could put David's affairs right without troubling him. I couldn't bear to give in now."

"Weel, weel, a willfu' wumman'll ha'e her ain wey. But mind an' trust me. I ha'ena the ready money ye need, but I'll get it for ye the morn, an' ye'll pey aff Dobbie, no' forgettin' to keep back the price o' ma guid umburella. An' ye can pey back the money when ye can. . . . An' noo I'm gaun to help ye get Davie's tea ready, an' ye maun gang early to yer bed the nicht an' ha'e a guid sleep, puir lass."

On her way home Mrs. Wallace dropped into the grocer's shop.

"Hoo's trade, Mr. Ogilvy?"

"Deplorable! Waur nor ever, Mistress Wallace. Did ye forget somethin' when ye was in afore?"

"Na. But I cam' back to see if ye can tell me whaur I can get the len' o' forty pound the morn's mornin'."

"Forty pound!"

"Mphm. D'ye ken onybody wha wud ask nae questions an' pit the money in ma haun, for about three month?"

"Are ye serious, Mistress Wallace?"

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“ Ay, I’m serious, Maister Ogilvy.”

The grocer fixed his eyes on a tin of sardines, and slowly said, “ Aweel, I may say I ken the person ye’re speirin’ aboot, exac’ly.”

VI

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE

“**C**OME in to your tea, Davie,” called Jess from the door of the cottage. “I’m jist comin’,” replied her husband, who was bending over a plot under the wall.

“But you said you were coming half an hour ago.”

“Did I?” said David, grubbing in the earth. “D’ye like sweet-peas, Jess?”

“Yes. But I don’t like old tea and cold buttered toast,” his wife returned impatiently.

“Come, Davie.”

“I’ll be in the hoose in twa ticks, lass. Dinna fash yersel’. The world’s no’ comin’ to an end jist yet!”

“My patience is, David.”

“Nae fears! I ken yer patience better nor that! Jist think o’ the show o’ sweet-peas ye’ll

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ha'e in July, Jess! An' I'll let ye pu' as mony o' them as ye like, an' welcome, dearie."

"But can't you finish planting them after you've had your tea, Davie?" she asked, partly appeased.

"'Deed, I never thocht o' that! Of course, I can."

And David Houston rose and followed his wife into the cottage. "I'm vexed for keepin' ye waitin,' Jess," he said, as he joined her in the kitchen. "I doot I whiles forget things."

"Oh, never mind. It doesn't matter," she said coldly.

"Are ye angry wi' me, Jess?" he asked anxiously.

"Angry? Why should I be angry?"

"I—I thocht ye wasna pleased at—at somethin'," he answered lamely. "Ye see, I forget the time when I'm at ma gairden, an'——"

"You've been at the garden since seven o'clock this morning, David," she observed, as she filled his tea-cup. "Your breakfast was cold before you came to it, and so was your dinner."

"I didna fin' onythin' wrang wi' either o' them," he returned pleasantly. "Ye're a clever yin at the cookin'," he added admiringly.

Jess looked as if she had not heard him. It was the local Spring holiday, and she had made special efforts with the homely meals, each

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE

one of which had been spoilt through her husband's late appearance at table. Still, she had kept her temper so far.

"I'm sayin' ye're a clever yin at the cookin', Jess," he repeated.

"I'm glad you think so."

The tone of her voice was something new to David, and he paused in conveying half a slice of toast to his mouth, and stared at her.

Avoiding his gaze, she played with her spoon in an absent fashion.

"What's wrang, lass ? "

"Nothing."

"But ye're no' takin' yer tea. Are ye no' weel ? "

"Oh, be quiet ! "

"But I dinna like to see ye no' enjeyin' yer tea."

"Don't bother. Go on with your own tea, and get back to your garden."

Mr. Houston, with many an uncomfortable glance at his wife who, in spite of his efforts, refused to be drawn into conversation, continued his meal with hardly his usual hearty appetite, but with an obvious desire to show her that he appreciated the buttered toast.

"I think I'll ha'e a smoke noo," he remarked immediately he had finished, and was surprised when his wife, contrary to custom, failed to

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rise to fetch him his house pipe from the mantel-piece.

After a short period of waiting, he drew his briar from his pocket and proceeded to fill it.

Jess rose and began to clear away the dishes, a thing she usually delayed doing until David had enjoyed a ten minutes' smoke.

"Aren't you going to finish planting your seeds?" she inquired abruptly, addressing the teapot in her hand.

"I was thinkin' I wud wait till ye was ready to come oot to the gairden. It's fine an' warm the nicht."

"I don't think I'll come out to-night. I've other things to do. Don't wait," she said, with her back to him.

"What are ye busy about the nicht, Jess?"

"A lot of things."

Houston got up, put on his cap, and moved toward the door. "Come oot, if ye can," he said kindly. "I'm gaun to gi'e ye a great show o' sweet-peas for the Simmer."

She made no reply, and on the threshold he halted and turned. "Wud ye no' try a—a—a pill, dearie?" he asked with the utmost hesitation and diffidence.

The colour rushed to Mrs. Houston's face, and her eyes sparkled. She stamped her foot.

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE

“David Houston!” she cried, “Will you go to your garden when I ask you?”

“But, Jess,” he began.

A plate slipped from her hands and smashed in fragments on the bottom of the sink. “See what you’ve made me do!” she exclaimed.

“Och, never heed aboot the dish, lass,” David stammered at last. “I—I wish ye wud tell me what’s troublin’ ye.”

“I wish you would go when I ask you,” said his wife, her lips trembling.

“Weel, I’ll gang to please ye,” he returned miserably, “but I wish ye wud tell me what—”

He was interrupted by the tinkle of a bell.

“Oh, dear!” sighed Mrs. Houston hopelessly.

“Wha can that be?” said her husband. “It’s past Postie’s time. Wull I gang an’ see, Jess?”

“Yes,” said Jess in a choked voice.

With an anxious look at her, David left the kitchen, closing the door behind him.

Jess hid her face in her apron. “I tried to—to give him a treat to-day,” she thought bitterly, “but he thinks of nothing but his garden. The breakfast spoilt, the dinner spoilt, and the——”

She lifted her head and listened. She heard David’s voice and another’s.

“Miss Perk!” she groaned. “Oh, I hope Davie ’ll have the sense not to ask her in. . . . No! She’s away!”

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She heard the front door shut, but the voices began again.

“He’s asking her into the parlour,” she sighed.
“I might have known he would do it.”

Presently the kitchen door opened and David looked in. “Jess,” he said in a loud whisper, “Miss Perk’s in the paurLOUR, wantin’ to see ye.”

“Is she?” said his wife languidly, turning the water on to a saucer.

“Ye’ll no’ be lang, wull ye?”

“I don’t know.”

“But she—she’s wantin’ to see ye parteeclar,” he said, entering the kitchen.

“What about?”

“I didna speir. But ye’ll no’ be lang, wull ye, Jess? I’ll gang an’ tell her ye’re jist comin’, an’ then I’ll get on wi’ plantin’ the sweet-peas. Eh, lass?”

“Seeing you asked Miss Perk into the house, you better go and keep her company till I’m ready,” said Mrs. Houston calmly.

“But——”

“I can’t be ready for half an hour. The tea was so late to-night.”

“Hauf an’ oor! An’ what wud I say to her for hauf an’ oor?”

“You might ask her if she likes sweet-peas,” said Jess, and could have bitten out her tongue for saying it.



“Miss Perk’s in the paurLOUR, wantin’ to see ye.”—PAGE 124



“Are ye ever sorry ye mairrit me?”—PAGE 136

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE

For a moment or two her husband regarded her with puzzled eyes. Then his face reddened.

“I’m vexed if I’ve done the wrang thing, dearie,” he said gently. “The seeds can bide. I’ll gang into the paurLOUR an’ dae ma best to—to be pleesant an’ a’ the rest o’ ’t. If ye like, I’ll pit her oot the hoose.”

“No, no. You mustn’t do that. Just say I won’t be long.”

David took a step nearer his wife, then turned abruptly and left the kitchen.

“It was too bad of me,” thought Jess, the tears filling her eyes.

Once more the door opened, and her husband whispered imploringly, “For peety’s sake, dinna be mair nor hauf an ’oor.” He vanished, and she heard him enter the parlour.

Mrs. Houston dropped into a chair and laughed quietly with the tears still in her eyes. “Poor Davie! If he had only made me laugh sooner! But I must be quick and go after him.”

Within ten minutes, her cheeks flushed and her eyes very bright, she opened the door of the parlour.

Miss Perk was sitting at the window, and Mr. Houston occupied an inch or two of the chair nearest the door, the length of the room lying between them.

“Good-evening, Mrs. Houston,” said Miss

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Perk as Jess greeted her. "Mr. Houston and I have been having quite a delightful chat, haven't we, Mr. Houston?"

"Ay," said, David, as if he were telling a lie.

"He has just promised to bring you to my lecture on Thursday week," Miss Perk resumed, smiling graciously across the room, "and also to Mr. Croker's lecture the following Monday. And he has *almost* promised that you will both attend *all* our classes and lectures next season. I'm quite charmed, Mrs. Houston."

Without daring to meet his wife's eyes, David rose, and saying, "Excuse me, I maun gang oot to the gairden," left the room with all speed.

Jess managed to hide her vexation, and made a common-place observation on the fineness of the weather for the holiday.

Miss Perk cordially agreed with the observation and continued—

"It must be so gratifying for you, Mrs. Houston, to notice the decided improvement in your husband."

"But he hasn't been ill," said Jess in surprise.

"I mean in his methods—his business methods, you know."

"Oh!" exclaimed the young woman, taken aback. "I don't understand," she added, haughtily.

"Why, every one is talking about him,"

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said the visitor pleasantly, if rather patronisingly, “and saying how industrious he is becoming, and so attentive to his work. I’m sure you must have noticed a difference during the past six months.”

Mrs. Houston held her tongue.

“Perhaps you don’t notice things as we do,” Miss Perk went on. “But I, and many of my friends, can assure you that the improvement is there, and we sincerely trust it may be permanent. I’m sure you will do all in your power to make it so. You know it is a young wife’s duty to use all her influence in—in——”

“What are you going to lecture on on Wednesday week, Miss Perk?” Jess asked, with strained politeness.

“*Thursday* week, Mrs. Houston, *Thursday* week, at seven o’clock. Well, curiously—or perhaps I should say *appropriately*—enough, I intend to read a paper on the young wife’s influence during the first year of married life. I have earnestly endeavoured to treat the subject with the seriousness and deep consideration it deserves. But to return to your husband, I am sure you must be delighted by what I have told you, for of course you are aware that in marrying him you entered upon quite a precarious existence, and I am sure, also, that you will not take offence when I tell you that I and many of

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my friends have frequently trembled for your future."

"It was very kind of your friends and yourself," said Jess, with a sweetness in her voice which would have sounded suspiciously to any one but her visitor.

"Ah, but, being Christians, we cannot but interest ourselves in our neighbours. And since you came to settle in Kinlochan, I, for one, have been keenly interested in your life, and have always hoped that nothing might occur to make you less satisfied with it than you appear to be. I thought that, perhaps, the few words I offered you some months ago might have been instrumental towards your husband's improvement, but as you say you do not notice any change in him, I conclude the improvement has come from himself, which is all the more creditable to him."

"Yes," murmured Jess with a mildness she was far from feeling.

"I heard only the other day that Sir Archibald was simply delighted with the way in which his greenhouses had been remodelled and repaired, and that he was going to recommend your husband to Lord Montgomery, who was thinking of——"

"Lord Montgomery arranged with David yesterday," said Mrs. Houston, with the merest note of triumph in her voice.

"Indeed? That is extremely gratifying.

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE

Well, Mrs. Houston, you must now make up your mind to encourage you husband as much as possible, so that there is no chance left for a relapse. I had thought of speaking to him myself, but no doubt the matter is safe in your hands."

"I'll think about it," said Jess, holding herself in. "Have you seen my aunt, Mrs. Wallace, lately?" she inquired suddenly.

"No—no; not lately. Not for some time, in fact. I trust she is quite well," Miss Perk replied, with a smile that might have been misconstrued.

"Oh, Aunt Wallace is always well," the niece returned cheerfully.

The visitor mentioned a few local topics, but in a hurried manner suggesting that she was ill at ease. "Do you expect your aunt this evening, Mrs. Houston?" she inquired, about five minutes later.

"Aunt Wallace just comes along when it suits her. She might come in any time."

Miss Perk rose. "I'm afraid I cannot wait longer on the chance of the pleasure of a chat with her; but pray give her my kind regards when you see her. I'll pop in soon again, and perhaps find her with you. Now I must really go."

Mrs. Houston conducted her visitor to the

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door, and in the porch the latter said, "I thought we should have found your husband in the garden. I should like to have seen him again."

"He's not there," said Jess, looking about. "He'll likely have walked along the road."

"Well, perhaps you can take a message for him. You might kindly tell him that our drawing-room window is not working nicely, and ask him to come and put it right *first thing* in the morning. Can you remember that, Mrs. Houston?"

"I'm sorry," said Jess—she wasn't—"but he will be busy all to-morrow."

"The day after will do."

"I don't think he could attend to it for a fortnight or three weeks."

"Dear me! I didn't know he was so busy as all that," said Miss Perk in a tone of annoyance. "However, I'll call at his workshop to-morrow, and see what can be done. Good evening, Mrs. Houston."

"Good evening, Miss Perk."

Jess re-entered the cottage, and met David in the dusky passage.

"Is she awa'?" he whispered.

"Yes," replied his wife, smiling in spite of herself. "She wanted to see you." She delivered the message, and told him what she had said to the visitor in reply.

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE

"I wudna gang inside her hoose for five pound. She gets me to promise things I dinna mean. I'm vexed at ma stupeedity, lass."

"Never mind, Davie."

"Aw, but, Jess, I didna mean to annoy ye."

"It's all right, Davie lad. I daresay we'll be none the worse of the lectures."

"I'm vexed aboot the lectures, but I'm mair vexed aboot anither thing."

"What's that?" She felt a thrill of pleasure to think that at last he understood the cause of her annoyance earlier in the evening. After all, she had not laboured for his creature comforts in vain. "What's that?" she repeated softly and encouragingly.

"The—the pill," he stammered. "I didna mean to annoy ye when I mentioned it. Are ye feelin' quite weel noo?"

For an instant Jess felt she wanted to slap his face. Then she burst out laughing.

"I'm gled ye're no' angry wi' me ony mair," he said, and kissed her.

"Did you get the sweet-peas planted?" she inquired, as she drew him into the parlour.

He shook his head. "Ye see, I didna gang oot to the gairden efter a'. I jist sat in the kitchen waitin' for her to gang. I hadna the hert to plant onythin' when ye was angry wi' me, Jess."

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“You’re just a laddie, Davie,” she said, not chaffingly, but with a world of affection in her voice. “And now I’m going to have an hour at the books,” she added quickly.

“Wull ye no’ come for a walk, dearie?”

“I’ll come afterwards. It’ll be too dark for the garden now, so you had better take your paper and keep me company till I get through the accounts.”

She laid ink and pen on the table, and brought her husband’s ledger from the bookcase. She seated herself, thinking how much more cheerful the figures before her were to-night than six months ago. Among the neatly kept accounts she forgot the worries of the day, and now and then fell to dreaming of how, in the not very distant future, she would present David with a balance-sheet (which she would have to explain) showing him the reward of his labour, in black and white.

“Donald Binnie is to get a rise next Seturday,” remarked Mr. Houston, settling himself in the easy-chair, and glancing admiringly at his wife.

“How much, Davie?”

“Twa shillin’s. He’s worked for it.”

“All right. Anything else?” asked Mrs. Houston, making a note in a small book.

“I gi’ed auld Angus five shillin’s yesterday. He wantit it for his sister. She’s vera badly the noo, puir buddy.”

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“I’ll go and see her to-morrow, Davie. But you would have been better to have told me first, for Angus always buys the wrong things for his sister. She’s far too old and frail for tinned salmon and cream cheeses.”

“But she likes them better nor onythin’ else, Angus tell’t me. She likes tasty things, ye ken. . . . But I’m aye daein’ the wrang thing, Jess,” he muttered sadly. “I sudna ha’e gi’ed him the five shillin’s.”

“Yes, you should. But you shouldn’t have given it till I had the chance of telling the poor man what to buy. It’s a pity he won’t let any one help to nurse his sister. Aunt Wallace made some grand soup the other day and took it to Angus, and——”

“Did he no’ tak’ it to his sister? I’ll ha’e to speak to him. He’s gey dour, is Angus.”

“I think he took it to his sister, Davie, but the next morning he brought it back to Aunt Wallace, and said his sister was terribly obliged, but she couldn’t eat it to please the King. And you never saw better soup. I wish I could make soup like Aunt Wallace. So, Davie, don’t give Angus any more extra money without telling me. He and I won’t quarrel, you know. We’re great friends.”

“I ken that, Jess. Angus wud dae onythin’ for *you*. Weel, I’ll mind what ye say. . . . Here’s

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three-pound-fifteen I got frae Maister Granger yesterday. He took aff five per cent. for prompt payment." David got up, laid the money on the table, and resumed his seat.

"Prompt payment!" said Jess, laughing, and turning up page 139 in the ledger. "The account has been owing about fifteen months. Doesn't Mr. Granger keep a footman and a butler?"

"He does that," said David; "an' a page forbye."

"Well, he should try keeping a penny diary. But I'm glad the account's paid. I was afraid it was going to be a bad debt. He's welcome to the five per cent. It'll likely be the only thing he keeps that doesn't cost him anything!"

"Ye're rale smairt, Jess," her husband remarked, smiling. "I daursay, if ye hadna been lukin' efter the books, the accoont wud ha'e been staunin' yet. I can never ask thae gentry for money."

"It seems to be the only way of getting it from a lot of them," said Mrs. Houston, slowly turning over the pages of the ledger. "They're not all like Sir Archibald of Arden, and Mr. Colman."

"That's true, lass. *They're* gentlemen though they're gentry."

"That's not bad, Davie!"

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“What, Jess?”

“Oh, nothing . . . Well, is that all?”

“Ay. I’ll gi’e ye a list o’ odd jobs the morn to pit in the book. I’m shair I dinna ken hoo I managed things afore ye cam’ to help me, Jess. I was aye a puir haun at the books. I—I think ye’re jist a great wumman.”

“You’re havoring, Davie.”

“I’m no’! But I like to hear ye speak a word like that. Ye’ve got sic a genteel wey o’ speakin’, dearie.”

“I can’t help it. Father spoke like Aunt Wallace, but mother wouldn’t let us follow his example. And then, when I was in the office, I——”

“I ken fine. I wud speak like ye, if I could manage it—but I canna.”

“I don’t want you to speak like any one but yourself, Davie. Really, I don’t. I—I couldn’t believe you, if you spoke differently.”

There was a short silence.

“Davie,” said Jess, breaking it, “have you ever put the lock on Aunt Wallace’s coal-cellar door?”

“I clean forgot,” he replied dejectedly.

“Oh, Davie! It’s such an old story!” she said reproachfully.

Mr. Houston groaned. “I’m that used to it that I forgot it. It’s jist like askin’ a blessin’ on oor meat.”

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“ But you always ask a blessing, Davie.”

“ Ye aye remind me, Jess.”

Mrs. Houston bit at the end of her penholder before she replied. “ You must see about the lock to-morrow.”

“ Ay ; I’ll see aboot it.” David got up from his chair and came close to her. “ Jess, Jess ! ” he cried. “ Are ye ever sorry ye mairrit me ? ”

“ Davie ! ”

“ But I’m askin’ ye. I’m aye daein’ things that vex an’ displease ye. Ye ken that fine. But I’m askin’ if ye’re ever sorry ye mairrit me.” He laid his big hand on her shoulder, and bent down, trying to look into her face. “ Jess, are ye ever sorry ? ”

“ Davie, dear ! ” was all she could say.

“ But tell me—tell me ! For God’s sake tell me ! ”

Somehow she did not answer him at once.

He dropped on his knees beside her, and his arm slipped down to her waist.

“ Jess, ma dear,” he whispered, “ if I ever hurt ye—if I ever hurt ye in the least wee thing, forgi’e me !—for I didna mean it. I *didna* mean it, lass.”

“ Don’t Davie ! ” she sobbed.

“ But ye ken what I mean. Oh, Jess, tell me, are ye *ever* sorry ye mairrit me ? ”

She found her voice. “ Never—never—

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE

never ! ” she cried, and her arms went round his neck.

The bell rang violently, and there was a savage hammering at the cottage door.

They hastened from the parlour together, clinging to each other in the moment of mingled happiness and apprehension.

A small boy stood in the porch, his face perspiring, his breath panting.

“ The shop’s on fire,” he spluttered.

“ What shop ? ”

“ The jiner’s shop. *Your* shop. Ye better come quick if ye want to see ony o’ it left.” And he disappeared in the darkness.

“ Davie ! ”

“ Jess ! ”

“ Here’s your cap, lad. I’ve got a shawl. Of course, I’m coming with you.”

They hurried from the cottage, and along the road. The glare of the fire—not so huge, after all—shone ahead of them, and was reflected in a little bay of the loch.

“ Oh, Jess,” gasped David.

“ Never mind, dear,” panted Jess.

They were running through a dark avenue when a figure seemed to come into being before David, threw up its arms, and dropped on its knees at his feet, so suddenly that David nearly fell over it.

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“ Angus ! ” cried husband and wife at once.

The old man clutched David's knees. “ I served yer fayther faithful,” he cried. “ I served him faithful ! An' I've served his son, I've served——”

“ Angus, man ! What are ye cooryin' there for ? ” cried David. He caught the poor soul by one arm, while Jess caught him by the other, and the twain dragged him to his feet. “ What is it, Angus ? ”

“ I served yer fayther, an' I've served his son as weel as ma auld age wud let me. Ay ; I've served——”

“ What am I to dae wi' him, Jess ? ” whispered Houston hoarsely. “ He's seen the fire, an'——”

“ The fire, the fire ! ” wailed Angus. “ It was masel' done that. I gaed to sleep, an' Maister Ogilvy had gi'ed me a bit tobacco, an'—oh, maister, maister, I served yer fayther, an' I've served his——”

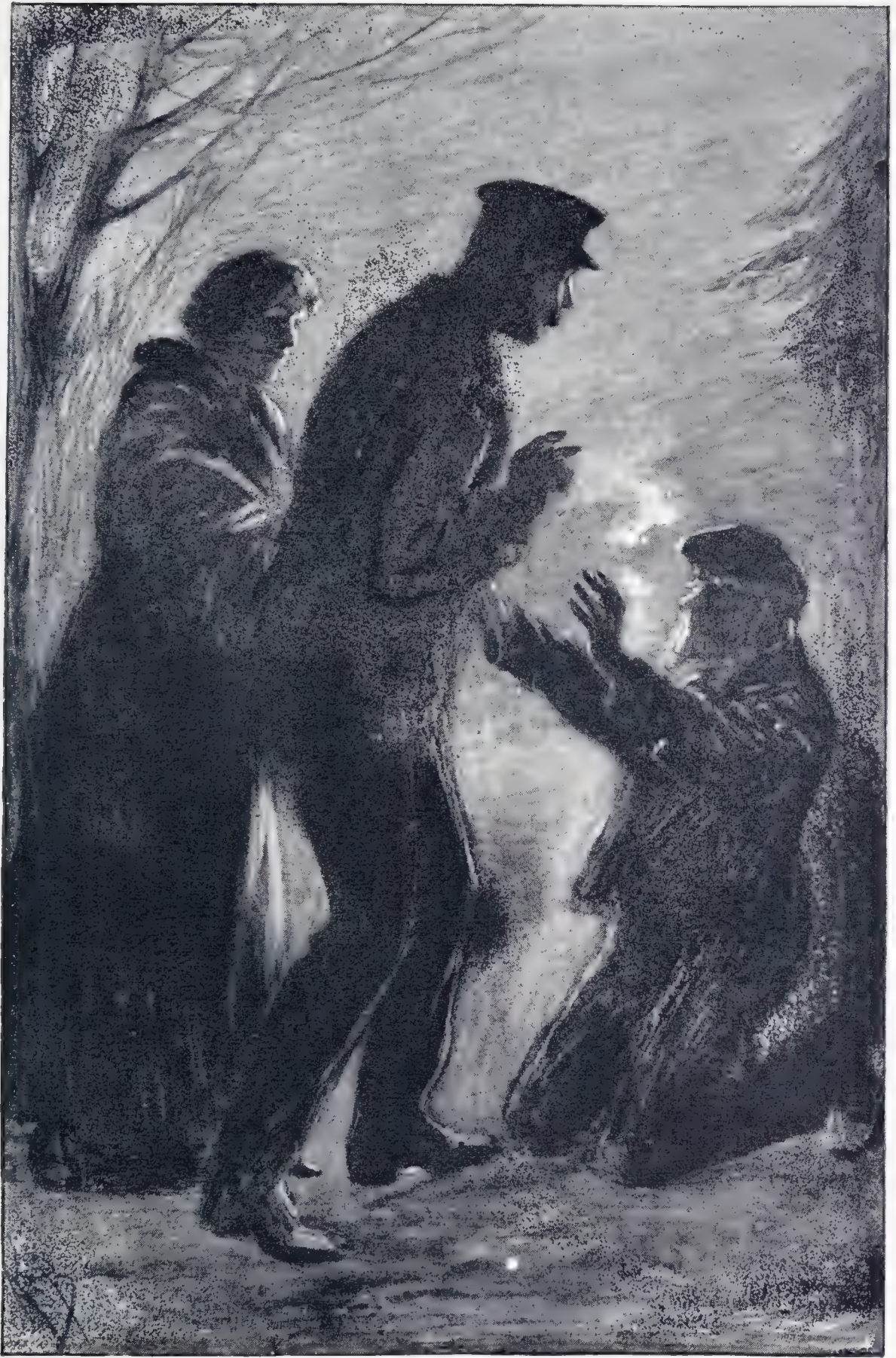
“ Davie,” said Jess, “ you run on, and I'll follow you. Run on, and see if you can do anything.”

“ Wull ye be safe, wife ? ”

“ Yes, yes ! I'll be after you in no time.”

Houston ran off, and his wife turned to the old man who was clinging to her hand.

“ Oh, Mistress Houston,” he began, “ I served his fayther faithful, an' I served——”



“ ‘Angus!’ cried husband and wife at once.”—PAGE 138



“A merry blaze, but a short one.”—PAGE 139

A LITTLE WARMTH AND A BLAZE

“Would you serve me, Angus?” she asked quietly, her free hand on her heart.

“Serve *you*, Mistress?” It meant more than a great oath.

“Well, Angus,” she said steadily, “you’ll serve me—and David too—very well, if you’ll try to forget about the fire at the shop, and go along and attend to the fire at Hazel Cottage. . . . No, no! the cottage isn’t on fire. I meant the kitchen fire. You’ll find the door open. Look after the fire—the kitchen fire—and have the kettle ready to the boil. D’you understand, Angus?”

“Ay, Mistress.”

“And you won’t leave the cottage till we get back?”

“Na, na!”

“What about your sister?”

“She’s sleepin’ lang syne. But oh, Mistress, d’ye think he’ll pit me awa’? I’ve served his fayther, an——”

“No, Angus. David won’t put you away, whatever happens. Now, go to the cottage. I’m depending on you.”

Old Angus did a strange thing. He kissed her hand before he let it go.

* * * * *

A joiner’s shop, especially if it be twenty miles from a fire station, makes a merry blaze, but a

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short one. Fortunately, the wind blew kindly, and David Houston's wood-yard escaped. Otherwise it was ruin, and blackest of black ruin.

Before midnight all was over, but it was after one in the morning when David and Jess walked slowly home together through the calm, sweet air. For half the distance they walked in silence, the woman gripping her husband's arm, for he was dead beat with much exertion. His face and hands were filthy with soot and charred wood.

He heaved a great sigh. "Jess, lass, ye'll be sorry ye mairrit me noo. We've next to naethin' left."

"No, I'm not sorry, Davie lad."

"But I deserve it," he groaned. "I clean forgot to pey ma insurance twa-three weeks syne. Oh, Jess, ye've a stupit, stupit man!"

"It's me that's stupid!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Davie, you've been suffering all this time about the insurance, and I forgot to tell you I paid it a fortnight ago."

VII

“PROFIT AND LOSS”

“**B**UT I can carry it easily,” said Mrs. Houston, referring to the small order she had just given the grocer.

“Na, na,” returned Mr. Ogilvy firmly, “I’ll send it wi’ the utmaist pleasure. That laddie o’ mines is jist eatin’ his heid aff, as it were, for want o’ somethin’ to dae. Ye see,” continued the grocer, who had been longing all the afternoon for some one to talk to, “ye see, Mistress Houston, it’s no’ as if it was the simmer, when things is kin’ o’ brisk—no’ as brisk as they micht be—but jist kin’ o’ brisk—an’ the laddie cairryin’ messages near a’ day to the veesitors, an’ whiles near rin aff his twa feet tryin’ for to obleege folk that forget what they’re needin’ till the last meenit, an’ are ower prood to cairry a paircel, unless maybe yin containin’ jools or scent or some ither vanity. ’Deed, ay! It’s fair

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monsterous the wey some folk come dancin' into the shop, jist as if their internal organs—excuse me mentionin' sic things, Mistress Houston—jist as if the organs I refer to had suddently remindit them—expectin' me to send proveesions to every pint o' the compass as quick as ye can say 'Jack Robison' ! ”

“ It's a good thing you have a good temper, Mr. Ogilvy,” Jess remarked, smiling, and preparing to depart.

“ I doot ma temper's no' aye that guid. Some o' the messages is hardly worth cairryin', an' it's suffeecient to mak' an or'nar' buddy like masel' bile to be commandit, for example, to send tippence-worth o' birdseed a mile along the shore, *wi'oot delay*, to a led dy that gets next to naethin' frae me as a rule.”

“ What a sin ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Houston sympathetically.

“ 'Deed, Mistress Houston, I whiles try to think o' Job bein' a grocer, but, efter a', it's maybe jist as weel for him he wasna. I doot he wud ha'e fled up as I did, though I tried no' to show it, when a led dy cam' in yin mornin' in July an' ordered an unce o' peppercorns to be sent hauf-a-mile in a hurry because her cook was waitin' on them, an' she wasna gaun stracht hame. She wasna a vera guid customer, but I tell't her as nice as possible I was rale sorry I

“PROFIT AND LOSS ”

had naebody to send wi' her esteemed order. I said 'esteemed' sarcastic-like, ye ken. But she turned on me as if she was a doochess an' me a bit o' dirt, an' speirt in an exceedin' offensive v'ice if I didna keep a boy. I was that angry I didna care if she never darkened ma door again, an' I tell't her I did keep a boy, but he was jist a human yin wi' twa airms an' twa legs, an' no' a new patent fleein' machine fit to cover twa-three hunner mile an' 'oor an' deliver messages afore they was richt oot the customers' mooths. An' she smiled gey soor-like, an' said I sud keep mair nor the yin boy. I was gaun to gi'e her a reply to that, but jist then the laddie cam' in; and thinkin' it better no' to create a scene, as it were, I sent him alang wi' the peppercorns."

"That was good of you, Mr. Ogilvy."

"Ay; an' I got a rich an' braw reward! She sent them back the next day, because they was black an' she wantit white. It's as true as I'm here, Mistress Houston!"

Jess tried not to laugh, and murmured something sympathetic. "Well, Mr. Ogilvy, I must be going. Thanks for sending the things; there's no hurry for them."

"I'll send them inside the 'oor. The laddie's at his tea the noo, but he'll no' be lang," said the grocer, who did not want her to go just then. "Ye'll be gey prood o' David's new place," he

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remarked : “ I never seen a finer jiner’s shop. I was through it wi’ David the ither day, an’ was tellin’ him it was jist like a palace efter the auld place. My ! it was unco clever o’ ye to mind aboot the insurance, Mistress Houston,” he went on with admiration in his voice. “ David tell’t me aboot it.”

“ Did he ? ” said Jess, looking and feeling shy.

“ Ay ; he tell’t me. Ye’re no’ vexed at me kennin’, are ye, Mistress Houston ? ”

“ No, no. But there’s no need to say anything about it to anybody else.”

“ I wudna dae that—nae fears ! I’m as secret as a—a—tinned tongue,” returned the grocer, finding a sudden inspiration on his counter. “ I am that, Mistress Houston. An’ I ken fine David tell’t me aboot it in the fullness o’ his hert, for he said, ‘ If it hadna been for ma wife, Ogilvy, I wud be a ruined man this day.’ That was when he was lettin’ me see the new premises, so to speak. An’ he was tellin’ me hoo dacent a’ his big customers ha’e been in lettin’ the jobs staun’ till he was in a posection for to attend to them ; an’ when I tell’t him it was jist because they kent when they had a guid man, he turned on me gey quick, an’ said, ‘ It’s the wife that brocht a’ the luck ! ’ An’ I believe he wasna faur wrang, Mistress Houston ! ”

“ PROFIT AND LOSS ”

“ I must really go, Mr. Ogilvy,” the young woman said, flushing.

“ e’ll be gaun to see yer aunt, may be ? ” said the grocer with exaggerated carelessness, while he toyed with his ham knife.

“ No. She went up to the town this morning.”

“ She gaed to the toon this mornin’ ? It’s queer I didna see her gaun to the boat. But I mind noo that ma attention was occupied wi’ pickin’ oot a hauf-dizzen chippit eggs for Mistress Waddell—puir buddy—jist when the boat was comin’ into the pier. An’ is yer aunt for bidin’ lang in Glesca, Mistress Houston ? ”

“ Oh, no. She’ll be home with the last boat to-night.”

“ Jist that. Ay. Mphm. The last boat the nicht. Ay,” said the grocer with nervous satisfaction, putting down the knife, and absent-mindedly laying his hand on a bunch of Cambridge sausages, and then drawing it away with a start at the clammy contact.

“ Well, good-bye just now, Mr. Ogilvy,” said Mrs. Houston, turning towards the door.

The grocer, however, seemed not to hear her, for, keeping his gaze fixed on the sausages, he continued :

“ The last boat the nicht. Ay. Jist that. Eh—what was it I was gaun to say, noo ? ” He halted, scratching the tip of his nose in a

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thoughtful fashion, while Jess felt both irritated and amused. "What was it I was gaun to say?" he repeated. "I doot I'm lossin' ma mem'ry."

"Was it anything about Mrs. Wallace?" asked Jess, unable to resist putting the question.

"Weel," returned Mr. Ogilvy, who had now reached what might be described as a twittering condition, "weel, Mistress Houston, I—I wudna say it wasna. In fac', I micht venture to say it—it *was* aboot your highly respectit aunt. Ay. I wud be tellin' ye an untruth if I said it wasna." Here he paused, transferred his gaze from the sausages to his boots, and, heaving a soft sigh, passed his hand across his forehead.

"Yes, Mr. Ogilvy?" Mrs. Houston murmured encouragingly.

"Whaur was I?" helplessly inquired the grocer. "Oh, ay. I was speakin' aboot your aunt, as it were. Was I no'?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Houston again, beginning to wish she had not waited.

"I—I hope, Mistress Houston, ye ha'e nae objection to ma speakin' aboot yer highly respectit aunt?"

"So long as you don't say nasty things about her," replied Jess, as lightly as possible.

"Aw, Mistress Houston!" exclaimed the grocer, "ye ken fine I wudna dae that. The

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words wud choke me, jist as if they was fish banes. Ay, wud they! I micht say I conseeder Mistress Wallace a—an exceedin’ admire-able pairty. I dae that.” Again he wiped his brow.

The young woman looked out through the open door.

“An exceedin’ admire-able pairty,” Mr. Ogilvy repeated almost to himself, and relapsed into silence.

“Did you want to give me some message for my aunt?” Jess inquired at last. “I’ll see her to-morrow morning. But she’ll likely be coming into the shop on her way from the boat to-night.”

“Na. She’ll no’ dae that. I ken she’s no’ needin’ onythin’. She got extra proveesions yesterday, an’ I was wunnerin’ at the time what that forebodit, no’ bein’ aware o’ her premeditated jaunt to Glesca. Na; she’ll no’ be in here the nicht.”

“Well, if you’ve any message, Mr. Ogilvy, I’ll be glad to give it to her to-morrow.”

“I’m shair I’m vera greatly obleeged to ye, Mistress Houston,” said the grocer, moistening his lips and clutching gently at his apron. “Ye see—ye see, it’s a maitter that I’m kin’ o’ sweirt to mention to her masel’! I’ve tried to mention it mair nor yinst, but ma stammerin’ tongue wudna let me. So, if ye’ll be saekind as to——”

Rather alarmed, Jess interposed, saying :

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“ But oh, Mr. Ogilvy, if it’s anything *particular*, I really think you should say it yourself.”

“ I canna, I canna ! ” he asserted gloomily. “ But I’ll tell ye aboot it, Mistress Houston, for I ken ye’re rale discreet, and then ye can decide if ye’ll tell yer highly respectit aunt for me.”

“ No, no ! You mustn’t tell me, Mr. Ogilvy,” cried Jess, flushing. “ I m sure it’s none of my business.”

“ If ye please——”

“ Oh, no ! I must go now. David will be wondering what’s keeping me. I was to call at the shop for him. Good——”

“ Bide a wee, bide a wee,” he implored. “ Ye see, it wasna till I got the quarter’s accoont frae the merchant,” he said rapidly, “ that I fun’ oot that I had been chairgin’ her, for weeks an’ weeks, a penny a pun’ ower muckle for her ham.”

“ Her what ? ”

“ Her ham. She’s the boy for ham, yer aunt ! Mighty me ! What am I sayin’ ? I’m shair I didna mean onythin’ disrespectfu’. I merely wantit to gar ye perceive that, conseederin’ the quantity o’ ham she conshumes, a penny a pun’ mak’s a difference in time. . . . That’s a bad hoast ye’ve gotten, Mistress Houston. I’ll ha’e to gi’e ye a wheen jujubes.”

“ I’m all right now, thank you,” said Jess,

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recovering herself. “Do you mean that you want me to explain to my aunt about the ham?”

“Jist that, if ye please.”

“But surely you can tell her yourself? She won’t be angry.”

“Wull she no’? I doot it. I yinst made a mistak’ in her pass-book—it was a wee blot that pit me wrang—I thocht it was a saxpence when I was addin’ it up, and it was jist a penny—an’ I can tell ye she was gey pit oot, and I felt gey sma’. I’m feart for neither man nor beast nor deevil, but I canna thole her vails o’ wrath, as it were. It was jist terrible!”

“Was she not joking? She’s fond of her joke, you know.”

“’Deed, ay; ’deed, ay. But I dinna think she was jokin’ aboot the pass-book. Na! As shair’s I’m here, I hadna the speerit o’ a wulk when she was dune wi’ me. . . . But—but, ye see, Mistress Houston, ma chief object o’ askin’ ye to—to break it gently, so to speak, is—is that I—I dinna want to—to feel like a wulk a second time. Na, it’s no’ exac’ly that either,” corrected Mr. Ogilvy, the beads breaking out on his forehead.

“I think I know what you mean.”

“Dae ye?” he exclaimed eagerly.

“You mean that you’re afraid you might get

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angry yourself if my aunt said much, and perhaps quarrel with her. Is that it ? ”

“ N—na. I wudna get angry. . . . Na. That’s no’ ma feelin’, thenk ye kindly a’ the same. Ma feelin’ is somethin’ mair—aw ! hoo can I describe it ? Eh—somethin’ mair saft-like.” With this Mr. Ogilvy grew so red in the face that Jess knew her suspicions were only too well founded.

“ I’ll tell my aunt about the ham,” she said from the doorway. “ And I’m sure you don’t need to bother about that, Mr. Ogilvy.”

“ Thenk ye, thenk ye,” he murmured. “ Wud ye mention, think ye, that ma feelin’ is—a—kin’ o’ saft-like ? ”

But with a hasty good-bye Jess fled, and it cannot be definitely stated that she heard his last sentence.

“ Samuel Ogilvy,” said the grocer bitterly to himself, “ There’s mair nor yer feelin’ saft-like ! ”

* * * * *

Mrs. Houston pushed open the door of the workshop and entered with the regretful feeling of having neglected her husband in a most unwifely fashion.

“ It’s yersel’ ! ” cried the joiner cheerfully, sliding off a bench, upon which lay an unfinished



“‘It’s yersel’!’ cried the joiner cheerfully, sliding off a bench and folding up the last number of ‘The Gardener’s Chronicle.’”—PAGE 151



“‘I—I doot I’ve dune the—wrang thing,’ he stammered.”—PAGE 153

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panel, and folding up the last number of *The Gardener's Chronicle*.

“ I'm sorry I've kept you waiting, Davie,” she said, nodding and smiling to old Angus, who, after respectfully returning the salutation, seized a large plane and proceeded to trim a piece of board that lay handy, as if he had been engaged upon it all afternoon.

“ Och, ye didna keep *me* waitin’,” replied Davie as he placed the paper in his pocket. “ I hope ye didna hurry for me, Jess ? ”

“ Of course I didn't hurry,” she returned, naturally a little irritated. “ But I'm later than I said I would be.”

“ Are ye ? 'Deed, I thocht it was an 'oor earlier onywey,” said David easily, consulting his old silver watch. “ But I'm ready for ye,” he added, flinging his apron on the bench and taking his jacket from a peg in the wall.

“ There's no hurry,” said Jess, the least thing coldly. “ I can wait until you finish the work you were at when I came in.”

“ Oh, I was jist takin' a keek at the *Chronicle*. There's a fine bit o' writin' aboot——”

“ What's that under your apron, David ? ”

“ That ? Oh, there's nae hurry for that. It'll dae fine the morn.”

“ But you're going to Mr. Donaldson's at Corriemore to-morrow.”

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“ So I am. Weel, it’ll dae fine the next day. We’ll awa’ hame noo.”

“ How long would it take you to finish that bit ? ” she asked, indicating the panel.

“ No’ abin ten meenits.”

“ Well, do it now, David, and I’ll wait.”

“ Na, na. I’m wantin’ ma tea, an’ so are you, lass. I’ll leave word for Binnie to feenish it first thing i’ the mornin’.” He was on the point of telling old Angus to tell Donald Binnie, when Mrs. Houston prevented him.

“ Do it yourself, David,” she said firmly. “ What’s the use of leaving over a ten minutes’ job ? ”

“ Weel,” he said good-naturedly, hanging up his coat, and throwing aside the apron, “ when I come to think o’ ’t, I believe ye’re richt—richt as usual.” And smiling at his wife, who had seated herself on a stool not far from him, he selected a sheet of sandpaper and fell to work.

Old Angus, with an effort that racked his frame, succeeded in suppressing a chuckle, and, winking violently, went on with his planing, muttering to himself, “ *She kens the wey ! She kens the wey !* ” over and over again.

Within the time he had mentioned David blew the last cloud of soft dust from the panel, and smiled again at his wite, receiving a smile in response.

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“Angus,” he called, as he donned his jacket, “ye can gang noo. What’s that ye’re workin’ at ? ”

The old man laid down his tool, stared for twenty seconds at his handiwork, and then looked at his employer. “I—I doot I’ve dune the—wrang thing,” he stammered, holding up the board.

Houston’s face clouded, and his lips tightened for an instant. “Man, ye sudna ha’e——” he began.

“Davie,” whispered Jess, “don’t say anything.” She rose and crossed the floor to where Angus was standing, gazing piteously at the fine wood he had spoilt, for his sight was failing him, and he would not have spectacles. “Angus,” she said brightly, “that’s just what I’m wanting for a shelf in the kitchen. Just the very thing. . . . Isn’t it, Davie ? ” she asked, looking round at her husband.

“But the wudd’s faur ower guid for a——” David was trying to say when he was checked by a second “Isn’t it, Davie ? ”

“Ay,” he replied, lamely. Then perceiving what was required of him, he called to the old man, “Ay, Angus ; it’s jist what Mistress Houston was wantin’. It’s maybe a wee thing to the lang side, but ye can tak’ twa-three inches aff it the morn.”

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“ But I’ve dune the wrang thing,” murmured Angus dejectedly.

“ I’m glad you have, Angus,” said Mrs. Houston cheerily, “ because now I’ll get my shelf sooner than I expected. Now, away and get your tea.”

The old man, with a low-spoken good-night, left the workshop, but ere he closed the door behind him he looked back at Jess with a benediction in his eyes, and all the way home he kept saying to himself “ *She* kens the wey, *she* kens the wey ! ”

With her hand Jess was brushing some powdery wood from David’s waistcoat when he softly exclaimed, not without difficulty—

“ Ye’re an awfu’ nice wumman, Jess ! ”

“ I like to see you tidy, Davie.”

“ I didna mean that. I meant the wey ye saved Angus, for I was gey wild at him for spilin’ that bit wudd. If ye hadna been here, I doot I wud ha’e lost ma temper. The wudd was a spaycial bit for young Maister Cochrane, him that’s aye workin’ at models—an’ I’ll ha’e to send to the toon to replace it.”

“ I’m sorry for that, Davie.”

“ Weel, weel, dearie, I’m gled ye kep’ me frae lossin’ ma temper. But whiles I dinna ken what to dae wi’ Angus. He’s been nae use since the fire, an’ he’s been less since his sister dee’d. I

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wantit to gi’e him a kin’ o’ pension, as ye ken, Jess, but I seen he wud be offendit. He said he wud never eat the breid o’ idleness as lang as he was leevin’, puir man—an’ I hadna the hert to pit him awa’.”

“ But he was working when I came in,” said Jess, flicking some specks of dust from her husband’s jacket collar.

“ Aw, he aye stairts to work when you or yer aunt comes into the shop—for, ye see, he winna let ye think he’s dune—but he usually does the wrang thing, an’—an’ it’s gey provokin’ whiles.”

“ So it is, Davie. But can’t you give him his own work to do ? ”

“ Ay. But he forgets, an’ turns sleepy-like, an’ forbye that, he doesna see vera weel. We maun jist thole wi’ his weys, an’ dae the best we can for him, and I maun keep ma temper wi’ him, for, to tell ye the truth, ma dear, I wudna like to see the shop wantin’ him. Weel, we’ll gang noo.”

“ But,” said Jess, when they had started on the way home, “ how would it do to put him to work in the garden ? ” She half smiled, unable to keep from thinking that the suggestion was a brilliant one.

“ Na, na ! ” came the decided reply. “ The gairden’s been neglectit enough this while back wi’oot pittin’ a man on to it that wud spile it—

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ruin it—a'thegither. I suppose ye was jist jokin', Jess ? ”

“ Well, perhaps I was,” she replied, trying not to look disappointed.

“ I thocht that. For if Angus had been ony guid at the gairdenin', I wud ha'e had him at it lang syne. It's a perfec' hertbreak to think o' the state the place has been in since the spring.”

“ Never mind, Davie. You had a hard fight, and you got the best of it, and everybody's proud of you,” said his wife warmly. “ I know how hard it has been for you.”

“ Tits ! It wasna as bad as a' that. An' I'm shair I wud never ha'e been whaur I am if it hadna been for yersel', ma dear. It's a peety aboot the gairden, but I'd shinner see it like a midden, plantit wi' auld tin cans an' broken gless, nor let Angus try his haun at it. Guidsake, Jess, the puir body doesna ken the difference atween a dahlia an' a dandelion, an' I doot if he would ken a crocus bulb frae a Spanish ingin ! Ye see, he never had a fancy for gairdenin'.”

“ I've heard him talking about *your* flowers,” Jess remarked.

“ Oh, ay, he'll talk aboot onythin' he thinks 'll please ye, lass. But maybe he was wrang when he thocht talkin' aboot *ma* flooers wud please ye,” said David, with a sly glance at his wife.

“ Davie ! ” she cried reproachfully.

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“See! there’s Mr. Ogilvy waving to you.”—PAGE 157



“‘It’s heids!’ he murmured, when he had lifted his right hand.”—PAGE 162

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“ D’ye ken, I whiles think ye like the gairden better the wey it is noo nor the wey it was a twal’-month syne. Eh, Jess ? ”

“ Now you’re havering ! ”

“ But ye like me better in the shop or at a job nor in the gairden,” he persisted.

“ I like you anywhere, lad,” she replied sweetly, but evasively.

“ Hoo d’ye mean ? ”

“ Oh, I’m not going to explain—if you can’t understand. See ! there’s Mr. Ogilvy waving to you.”

They returned the salute of the grocer, who stood in his door. “ My ! but they’re the twa happy yins ! ” he sighed, as he watched them along the road.

“ Poor Mr. Ogilvy,” murmured Mrs. Houston gently.

“ What’s wrang wi’ him ? ” asked her husband.

“ I doubt he’s very bad, Davie,” she answered, smiling faintly. “ He wants to marry Aunt Wallace.”

“ Has he no’ gotten ower that yet ? I thocht her tongue had cured him lang syne.”

“ I’m afraid it hasn’t—but you’re not to speak about aunt like that.”

“ Och, we a’ ken she’s got a gey shairp tongue, Jess. I’m no sayin’ onythin’ aboot her hert, mind ! ” he added seriously. Then he laughed,

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and inquired, "D'ye ken why he wants to mairry yer aunt, ma dear?"

"He's in love with her, of course."

"That's a sma' bit o' the reason. He wants to mairry her to get bein' yer uncle! Ay, that's it!" After which statement David looked pleased with himself.

"Don't be stupid!" retorted Mrs. Houston with affected sternness.

"It's a fac', though. He's got an awfu' high opeenion o' yersel'. D'ye ken what he said to me the ither day?"

"No; and I don't want to know."

"He said——"

"Be quiet!"

"Aweel, I'll tell ye anither time when ye're no' expectin' it," said David, smiling teasingly. "But hoo d'ye think he's gettin' on wi' his coortin'?"

Jess shook her head. "He doesn't seem extra happy just now."

"Maybe he's worrit aboot trade."

"He doesn't complain about trade now so much as he used to."

"That's a bad sign," observed David, thoughtfully.

"At least, he complains more about his customers."

"Mphm. He'll be turnin' his thochts frae

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business to—to——” The joiner stuck for want of a word to express himself. “But it’s a bad sign onyway,” he continued. “I mind when I used to turn frae ma wark on accoont o’ yersel’, Jess.”

“Do you blame it all on me?” she asked with the least trace of irony in her tone.

“Na,” he replied soberly. “I blame it on masel’. If I had peyed mair attention to ma wark, ye wud ha’e been better aff the day.”

“Whisht, lad!” she said in surprise.

“An’ maybe the gairdenin’ has been to blame tae,” he went on. “I’ve thocht that whiles lately. But ye ken, Jess, it’s a great temptation to me.”

“But, Davie, you’ve hardly touched the garden since the spring—since the fire,” she said gently.

David sighed. “Maybe it’s jist as weel. Ma trade’s the jinerin’, an’ I maun stick to it. . . . An’ I’m no’ complainin’,” he added more cheerfully.

“But you’ll get time for your gardening soon again, Davie,” she said.

“We’ll see, we’ll see.”

“Oh, but, Davie——” she began, and stopped, lest she should say too much.

Suddenly he turned toward her. “Ye’re the best wife a man ever had, an’ I envy naebody,”

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he exclaimed. "The fire was, maybe, a guid thing. It *was* a guid thing because o' yersel', ma dear."

"But, Davie," she said, breaking a long silence, "supposing the shop hadn't been insured——"

"I wud ha'e been dune for. Fine I ken that!"

"But wait a minute. Supposing the shop hadn't been insured, and supposing you hadn't been married—what would you have done?"

"That's a question!" he said, smiling.

"Would you have become a gardener?"

"Ye mean a gairdener to some gentleman?" he said after a pause.

"Yes—I suppose so."

"Na!" he replied firmly.

"Wouldn't you?" she cried, greatly surprised. "Why?"

"Weel, Jess, if I was to be a gairdener, I wud want ma ain gairden. D'ye see?"

She nodded gravely. "I see, Davie."

"I wud like a place like Davison's nursery."

"I know," she murmured. "I would like that too."

"Wud ye, lass?" he cried. "Weel, it's jist like ye to sympathise wi' yer man even in his daft-like dreams. But here we are, an' I'm shair ye're wearyin' for yer tea."

He pushed open the gate of Hazel Cottage,

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and they went up the path together, in the shine of the autumn sunset.

“ Davie,” she said earnestly, “you’re not to forget *our* garden altogether.”

“ Weel, to tell ye the truth,” he returned, glancing about him, “ I think I’ll ha’e an ’oor at it the morn, afore I gang to Corriemore.”

And Jess smiled quite gladly.

* * * * *

The last steamer was due at Kinlochan pier about seven o’clock, and when Mr. Ogilvy sighted her lights on the far side of the loch he proceeded to behave in a somewhat extraordinary fashion. His message boy having gone for the night, the grocer was alone in his shop, yet he looked about him as though he feared a watch upon his movements. Satisfied at last that he was unobserved, he opened his till and took out a penny, muttering to himself—

“ Ye’re a muckle eediot, Samuel Ogilvy.”

He regarded the coin for nearly a minute, replaced it in the till and took out half-a-crown.

“ It’s mair in keepin’ wi’ the operation,” was his inward comment.

Just then a customer came in, but fortunately did not wait long, although after her departure the grocer could not remember where he had laid the half-crown.

“ I’ve nae time to luk for it the noo,” he

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thought, glancing through the window at the lights of the approaching steamer.

Having picked a florin from the till, he gazed at it earnestly, and then spun it into the air. As it fell he grabbed at it, but missed it, and it struck the floor and rolled under the counter.

“ ‘Tits ! ” he exclaimed. “ I’ll get it afterwards.”

He spun a second florin, and this time caught it between his palms.

“ It’s heids ! ” he murmured, when he had lifted his right hand. “ I’ve to gang an’ meet her. Oh, me ! ”

Five minutes later, as the steamer reached the pier, Mr. Ogilvy, having already put up the shutters, locked the door of his shop—at least an hour before the usual time—and hastened along the road in the direction of Mrs. Wallace’s abode.

On reaching it he turned and walked slowly back towards the pier, which the steamer had now left.

“ She’s a lang time comin’,” he said to himself. “ Maybe she’s no’ comin’ the nicht, efter a’. Oh, me ! Samuel Ogilvy, ye’re jist a nondescript nincompoop ! ”

He retraced his steps to the cottage, and again set out toward the pier. Several people

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from the steamer passed him, while he pretended to be absorbed by the view over the sea-wall.

But at last the looked-for figure came dimly in view, and thereupon Mr. Ogilvy lost his head.

“ Oh, I hope she’ll no’ see me ! ” he groaned, and gazed steadily across the loch.

Mrs. Wallace came through the dusk, and halted behind him. “ Is that you, Maister Ogilvy ? ” she said, and there was something in her voice that added to the grocer’s discomfort. “ Is that you, Maister Ogilvy ? ” she repeated, before he nerved himself to turn and face her.

“ Ay, it’s jist me, Mistress Wallace. . . . It—it’s a fine nicht.”

“ It *is* a fine nicht,” she replied, “ a fine nicht for plunkin’ the shop, Maister Ogilvy ! Whit d’ye mean shuttin’ yer shop afore time ? ”

“ Was ye wantin’ somethin’ ? ” he stammered.

“ Ay, wis I ! An’ when I cam’ aff the boat an’ gaed to the shop, here the door shut, an’ the pairty that sud ha’e kep’ it open gallivantin’ aboot like a young yin ! ”

“ Aw, Mistress——”

“ Ay ; ye’re a fine yin to keep a shop ! An’ me yer best customer ! ” cried Mrs. Wallace. “ But dinna let me keep ye frae yer appintment,” she added with an unkind chuckle.

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“I—I’ve nae appintment, Mistress Wallace,” he returned desperately. “I jist cam’ oot to—to——”

“Oh, I’m no’ wantin’ to ken her name. We’ll be hearin’ it in the kirk shin, nae doot.”

“Ye maun ha’e yer joke, Mistress Wallace,” said Mr. Ogilvy with a very feeble grin.

“Ay, jist as you maun ha’e yer Jenny,” retorted his “best customer” with another chuckle.

The poor grocer stood speechless.

“Weel,” said Mrs. Wallace at last, and her voice was kindly, “I didna gang to the shop the nicht to buy—but to pey. I wantit to gi’e ye back the siller ye lent me a while syne. It sud ha’e been in yer pooch afore this, an’ I’m vexed it wisna. But there it is, an’ thenk ye for the len’ o’ it. Ha’e!”

Taking a packet from her underskirt pocket, Mrs. Wallace handed it to Mr. Ogilvy.

“Are ye shair ye’re no’ needin’ it?” he asked awkwardly.

“Na, na, man. I’m no’ needin’ it, an’ I’m gled ye’ve gotten yer ain again. I’m no’ guid at thenkin’ folk or peyin’ compliments, but I tell ye I’m obleeged to ye for yer help. Ye can coont it when ye get hame, an’ if ye fin’ a bawbee ower mony, ye can keep it—or gi’e it to yer Jenny. Ha! ha! Guidnicht, Maister Ogilvy. I’m wantin’ ma tea.”

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“ Mistress Wallace ! Mistress Wallace ! ” he exclaimed as she moved forward.

“ Weel, Maister Ogilvy ? ”

“ I—I was jist wantin’ to say that—that I’m aye ready an’ willin’ to dae onythin’ to serve you or yours, as it were.”

“ I believe ye, Maister Ogilvy,” she returned. “ An’ I’ll no’ forget whit ye’ve done. An’—weel, guidnicht again, Maister Ogilvy.”

The grocer wanted to accompany her, but he lacked the courage, and so he turned and went slowly in the other direction. “ Samuel Ogilvy ! ” he addressed himself moodily, “ ye’re a peetifu’ spectacle ! ”

VIII

SOME FRIENDS AND AN ENEMY

ANOTHER May had come, and the afternoon sunshine fell warmly on the south gable of Hazel Cottage.

Old Angus blinked drowsily and slightly altered his position on the section of a log which served him for a seat, when Mrs. Wallace, who for the last half-hour had been marching up and down the path with her niece's baby in her arms, sat down on the low chair that had been brought from the parlour for her convenience, and carefully adjusted the infant's garments and placed her umbrella in proper position. The child showing signs of waking up, Mrs. Wallace began to croon softly and persuasively, if not altogether tunefully, the ancient, brief and simple ditty—

“Shoo shaggy ower the glen,
Mammy's pet an' daddy's hen”—

which she repeated until it had the desired effect.

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“Is it sleepin’ ?” inquired Angus, taking out his pipe, and, having cautiously removed the plug of newspaper, peering regretfully at the remnant of tobacco left in the bowl.

“Ay, she’s sleepin’, the daurlin’,” Mrs. Wallace replied tenderly, looking down on her charge and gently removing the edge of the shawl from the tiny mouth.

“I was thinkin’ ye wud shin ha’e the wean stuffocatit if ye didna watch oot,” the old man remarked, feeling in his waistcoat pocket for a match. “It’s a mercy it doesna need as muckle breith as masel’.”

“Man, ye wudna need as muckle breith if ye kep’ yer mooth shut,” retorted Mrs. Wallace, adding, “Ye waste the biggest hauf o’ yer breith on yer stupit sayin’s.”

Angus did not answer till he had lit his pipe.

“Weel, Mistress,” he said slowly, “it’s no’ for me to instruct ye——”

“’ Deed, ye’re richt there !”

“But I doot it’s no’ gettin’ suffeecient fresh air to gar it grow nice.”

“I’ll fresh air ye !”

“Never mind me. I can fresh air masel’, thenk ye kindly. I’m shair ye wud be vexed if it growed up nippit an’ peely-wally.”

“Peely-wally !” exclaimed Mrs. Wallace indignantly. “An’ her the sturdiest lass that

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ever——Oh, ye auld footer, ye've waukened her again ! ”

“ I didna. It was yersel', Mistress. Yer v'ice is shairper nor mines.”

“ Haud yer tongue ! ” she muttered, and set about soothing the little one with croonings and caresses, while Angus grinned behind his pipe, at first in an irritating, but later in a more sympathetic manner.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Wallace's next remark was not a conciliatory one.

“ Ye micht think shame o' yersel', Angus, comin' here an' disturbin' the wean. To hear ye speakin', onybody wud think ye wis sellin' herrin'.”

“ Ha, ha ! ” laughed Angus, softly but sarcastically. “ I was jist thinkin' the noo, Mistress, that if ye kent anither sang, ye micht try singin' roon' the doors when the simmer veesitors is here. Eh ? ”

Mrs. Wallace smiled in a way that made the old man feel he had missed getting the last word.

“ D'ye no' think I wud dae better wi' a hurdy-gurdy,” she said slowly, “ seein' there's a monkey handy ? ”

Angus grinned feebly, and sucked at his pipe for inspiration.

Mrs. Wallace emitted a low chuckle of triumph,

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and beamed down on the sleeping child as much as to say, "We had him there, ma dearie!"

Angus writhed on his seat in his desire to pay her back, and puffed nervously.

Another low chuckle came from Mrs. Wallace, and the old man writhed again.

"Ye think ye're awfu' smairt," said Angus at last with biting irony in his tone.

"Na, na," she returned modestly. "I jist try to suit the comp'ny I'm in. There isna ony great need for smairtness the noo, ye ken."

"Ye're aye thinkin' o' *it*," he retorted, indicating the baby with the stem of his pipe.

"That's somethin' worth thinkin' o'," she rejoined. "But ye ken weel enough she's a lassie, an' ye needna be aye referrin' to her as *it*."

"Weel, ye see, Mistress, I'm aye thinkin' o' the peety o' it *bein'* a lassie, an' I canna——"

"An' whit's wrang wi' it—I mean *her*—bein' a lassie?" Mrs. Wallace fiercely demanded.

"Aw, it's jist a peety it wasna a laddie. If it had been a laddie it micht grow to be a man—a dacent man like its fayther."

"If she grows to be a dacent wumman like her mither, she'll dae fine!"

"*If!*"

"Whit d'ye mean, Angus?"

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“Och, she’ll grow up, if she doesna get stuffocatit.”

“Tah!. . . When I want yer advice, I’ll ask ye for it.”

“I hope ye’ll no’ come askin’ when it’s ower late,” he retorted. “Hooever, there’s aye a chance o’ yer niece bringin’ up the wean in spite o’ ye. We maun hope for the best.”

What Mrs. Wallace was going to reply—and it was doubtless something exceedingly crushing—was prevented by a new arrival.

“Here’s Ogilvy comin’,” said Angus, looking round the corner of the cottage. “What’ll *he* be wantin’? He’s lukin’ unco spruce in his Sawbath claes. I never seen him dressed on a hauf-holiday afore. . . . I suppose I best tell him to come roon’ here.”

“Ye best tell him David and Jess are awa’ to Kilmabeg, an’ they’ll no’ be hame till tea-time,” said Mrs. Wallace.

“Ay. But I’ll tell him ye’re here yersel’. I’ll get him for a witness that ye’re stuffocatin’ the wean, Mistress.”

With a grin on his face, Angus toddled away to meet the grocer, who was coming slowly up the path towards the porch. Mr. Ogilvy’s eyes were modestly turned ground-wards, and any one following him would have seen that his big fingers were working convulsively behind his back.

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"This is a fine day, Maister Ogilvy," said Angus.

"Eh? Oh, ay, it's a fine day—a fine day," the other stammered, for he had not expected to encounter the old man at Hazel Cottage.

"Ye'll be wantin' to see David, maybe?" said Angus.

"Ay." The word came with an effort, and the grocer said in his heart, "Samuel Ogilvy, ye're a leear!"

"Aweel, ye'll no' see David the noo. He's awa' wi' the wife to Kilmabeg. It's queer ye didna see them gaun by the shop, Maister Ogilvy."

Mr. Ogilvy, his face on fire, forced an incoherent reply, and then, recovering himself, said, as carelessly as he could: "Weel, weel, it wasna onythin' important. I'll see him the morn." And he made to depart.

"Bide a wee, bide a wee, Maister Ogilvy," Angus interposed. "Ye're no' gaun awa' wi'oot speakin' to Mistress Wallace. She's sittin' wi' the wean roon' the corner. Come awa', an' ye'll maybe get dandlin' the wee yin."

"I'll come anither time, Angus. I—I'm kin' o' pressed for time, as it were," the grocer returned.

"Och, ye can bide twa-three meenits—an' tak' a smoke," said Angus pleasantly, looking at his own empty pipe and thinking of his own empty tobacco-box.



“She’s sittin’ wi’ the wean roon’ the corner.”—PAGE 172



“‘Aw, Mistress Wallace,’ he murmured, removing his felt hat and wiping his forehead.”—PAGE 173

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“Na, I’ll no’ bide the day. I was thinkin’ o’ gaun back to the shop an’ gettin’ a wheen things tidied up, seein’ the place is quate an’ naebody aboot. Jist gi’e ma respec’s to——”

“Ye’re shairly no’ gaun to tidy up things wi’ yer guid claes on?” the old fellow interrupted. “Come awa’ an’ see Mistress Wallace, or ye’ll maybe offend her. She seen ye comin’ in at the gate.”

“Did she?” said the grocer feebly. “W— was she surprised to see me, think ye?” he inquired nervously.

Before Angus could speak, Mrs. Wallace was heard calling—

“Is that you, Maister Ogilvy?”

“Ay, it’s jist me,” he replied without moving.

“Weel, come here! I want to speak to ye.”

“Come awa’,” said Angus. “Ye dinna need to dandle the wean unless ye like. Come awa’, Maister Ogilvy.”

The grocer, on anything but flying feet, followed Angus round the corner of the cottage.

“My! but ye’re a masher the day!” cried Mrs. Wallace jocularly. “I suppose ye’re jist on yer road to meet her?”

“Aw, Mistress Wallace,” he murmured, removing his felt hat and wiping his forehead, on which a deep red line was visible.

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“Yer hat’s ower wee for ye,” she observed as he squeezed it on again. “Ye’ll be daein’ yer heid an injury, Maister Ogilvy. Is’t a new hat ? ”

“Ay. As ye say, it’s ower wee. I got Geordie Harvey to buy it for me when he was at the toon, an’ he forgot ma size an’ had jist to guess it. But I’ve seen a waur guess, an’ Geordie says if I weer it twa-three Sawbaths, it’ll fit like a glove. I’ll thole it in the meantime, onywey.” Here Mr. Ogilvy stopped abruptly, as one stops on suddenly realising that one has been talking for the simple sake of doing so.

“Ye maun be guid at the tholin’,” said Mrs. Wallace. “Ye’re like a lassie at a pairty wi’ sma’ slippers on big feet.”

“Ha-ha-ha ! ” laughed Angus. “A lassie wi’ big feet’ll thole onythin’ ! ”

“Haud yer tongue, or ye’ll wauken the baby again. . . .Weel, Maister Ogilvy,” she continued genially, “if it’s no’ jist time for yer appintment, ye best tak’ a sate, an’ ha’e a smoke, an’ rest ye, for ye’re lukin’ as if ye wud melt an’ rin doon the gairden intil the sea like lava frae a burnin’ mountain.”

“’Deed, it’s uncommon warm for the season o’ the year,” said the grocer, seating himself on a tree-stump ; “an’ to tell ye the truth, Mistress Wallace, I’m a wee bit decomposed wi’ the heat.”

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He produced his pipe, a plug of tobacco, and his knife, while old Angus ostentatiously drew forth a battered little tin box, opened it, and sighed absently but quite audibly.

“Are ye for a smoke, Angus?” Mr. Ogilvy inquired when he had cut himself a fill.

“I’m no’ heedin’, but I’ll tak’ yin jist to keep ye comp’ny,” said Angus obligingly, as he received the plug from the grocer. . . . “I’m a stupid buddy,” he said apologetically, two minutes later. “I’ve cut ower plenty for ma pipe. Ha’e ye a boax, Maister?”

“Pit it in yer ain boax, Angus,” returned the other kindly, although the trick was far from novel.

“Aweel, it wud be a peety to waste it.” And the tobacco-box seemed to shut with a snap of satisfaction. Having set his pipe a-going, Angus announced his intention of departing. “Dinna forget to gi’e David the letter I brocht, an’ dinna stuffocate the wean,” he said to Mrs. Wallace, offering the latter instruction with a grin.

“Dinna forget to gi’e Maister Ogilvy back his tobacco,” she retorted sharply.

“I was jist gaun to gi’e it back when ye spoke,” said Angus, in some confusion, producing the plug, which he had dropped into his pocket along with the tobacco-box. “Ye sud try to learn to mind yer ain business, Mistress,” he added in an aggrieved tone.

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“Angus maun ha’e his bit joke,” interposed Mr. Ogilvy pacifically, as he received his property. “He has nae intention o’ insultin’ ye, as it were. . . . An’ seein’ he’s gaun alang the road, I’ll jist gang wi’ him,” he said, rising abruptly.

Mrs. Wallace smiled unkindly. “Is it time ye wis gaun to meet her?” she inquired. “Of course, ye mauna keep her waitin’.”

The grocer fairly wriggled. “I—I—I’m no’ gaun to meet onybody!” he exclaimed.

“Weel, sit ye doon an’ rest ye,” said she. “I want to speak to ye about somethin’, Maister Ogilvy,” she added in an undertone.

After a brief period of indecision Mr. Ogilvy resumed his seat, nodding in a half-shamed fashion to Angus, who, being afraid lest Mrs. Wallace should confound him at the last moment, turned and took his departure, a thin, dry smile hovering about his lips.

“Ye sudna let him mak’ free wi’ yer tobacco,” Mrs. Wallace remarked to the grocer. “He’s no’ needin’ chairity since his sister dee’d.”

“Oh, I ken that fine, Mistress Wallace. But, ye see, it’s deefficult to get oot o’ a bad habit when ye’re auld. Angus canna help tryin’ to get his tobacco for naethin’, an’ I canna help gi’ein’ him it. But I’ll no’ dae ’t again if ye dinna like it.”

“Och, it’s nae odds to me if ye wis gi’ein’

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him yer hale shop. But that's no' the thing I wis wantin' to speak to ye aboot. . . . I wis wantin' to tell ye that Angus cam' here the day wi' a story about a new jiner stairtin' in Kinlochan. Ha'e ye heard onythin' about that ? ”

“ Ay,” said Mr. Ogilvy.

“ An' whit wey did ye no' tell us ? ”

“ I jist heard the—the rumour, so to speak, the day. I was gaun to speak to ye aboot it, if ye hadna mentioned it.”

“ Is there ony truth in the report ? ”

“ I doot there is. In fac', I ken there is. It's twa young men frae Paisley that's gaun to set up in Kinlochan, an' I hear they're vera pushin' young men.”

“ I'll push them ! ” muttered Mrs. Wallace, angrily.

“ But ye needna be feart for David Houston,” Mr. Ogilvy continued. “ They'll no' hurt him. He's ower weel in wi' the folk here nooadays.”

“ I wudna be ower shair o' that. Whit about a' the new hooses that's gaun to be builded ? ”

“ I didna think o' that,” he admitted, slowly. “ Na ; I didna think o' that. The jiner-work there'll be a fine big job. I wudna like to see it gaun by David. . . . D'ye think he's heard aboot the opposeetion, Mistress Wallace ? ”

“ Na ; he hasna heard yet. Him an' Jess

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gaed aff the day as blithe an' brisk as bees—like a pair o' young yins—jist like a lad an' lass afore they're mairrit."

"Ye mean, I preshume, that they gaed aff in a licht-hertit condeetion?"

"Ye preshume richt. I'm shair David had nae word o' the business. Angus got it frae a man wha heard it frae the factor."

"I heard it frae the factor hissel'. It was only fixed this mornin'. But I thocht David micht ha'e got wind o' 't. I suppose ye'll tell him when he comes hame?"

"I'll see. I wis thinkin' ye micht tell him yersel'."

"Me? Aw, Mistress Wallace! I'm no' the yin to break bad news. I canna dae it in a cheery enough style. Ma disposeetion is ower melancholical, an' I mak' the bad news seem waur nor it really is. I mind when John Cameron's wife ran awa'—eloped, as it were—wi' a man o' the name o' McMeekin, a brass-feenisher to trade, an' I was deputit to inform John o' the distressin' occurrence. I was near chokit wi' emotion, an' it was wi' a supreme effort that I produced the unseasonable information. But when I had feenished, John Cameron jist drew a lang breith, an' a' he said was; 'An' what are ye groanin' aboot, Ogilvy?'

"I'm tellin' ye this, Mistress Wallace, to

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illustrate the fac' that, wi' ma melancholical disposition, I'm inclined for to mak' bad news waur nor it really is—to exaggerate it, as it were."

"I ken ye're a kin' o' dismal buddy," said Mrs. Wallace agreeably, "but seein' ye've brocht guid news to David noo an' then, I thocht ye wud be the best yin to bring the bad news."

"Wud it no' be best to say naethin', an' jist let David fin' it oot for hissel'?"

"Na, na! I'm thinkin' it's the new hooses that's bringin' the new jiners to Kinlochan—a big job like that wud be a fine stairt for them—an' the shinner David gets his word in wi' the contractor the better. I jist hope he's no' ower late as it is. . . . Hoo dae ye think David wud staun' opposeetion?" she inquired abruptly.

Mr. Ogilvy rubbed his chin meditatively.

"D'ye think it wud mak' him strive mair?" his companion asked.

Mr. Ogilvy ceased rubbing his chin, and took to scratching his nose gently with his middle finger. "Is he no' strivin' the noo?" he said, at last.

Mrs. Wallace shook her head. "The gairden's got the haud o' him again, an' forbye that he's that ta'en up wi' this wee daurlin'"—she looked down at the infant—"that whiles Jess canna get him oot the hoose till ten i' the mornin'."

"It's no' a great sin to be ta'en up wi' his dochter," the grocer observed.

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“I didna say it *wis*, Maister Ogilvy, but it *wull* be a sin if her an’ Jess ha’e to suffer i’ the future,” Mrs. Wallace returned, solemnly. She patted the child tenderly, and continued: “I think a man’s the queerest thing in the hale o’ creation. I’ve leeved a lang while noo, an’——”

“Ye’re no’ that auld,” put in Mr. Ogilvy, gallantly.

“Haud yer tongue, please! I wis sayin’ I’ve leeved a lang while noo; an’ I’ve met twa sorts o’ whit ye micht ca’ honest, dacent, guid men—an’ I wudna like to say which is the warst o’ the twa. There’s the man that aye pits his business afore his wife an’ weans, an’ there’s the man that aye pits his wife an’ weans afore his business. I’ve never seen a man yet that kent hoo to divide hissel’.”

“Nae man can serve twa maisters,” remarked Mr. Ogilvy, seriously.

“Nae man sud try it,” she returned. “A man sud be his ain maister.”

“In theory, as it were.”

“Na! In practice, as it is. Theory’s a’ richt efter a man’s deid. Ye dinna buy a man wi’ wages: ye buy his wark; he disna sell hissel’ to his wife an’ weans: he lends hissel’ as lang as he has the richt an’ micht to dae it. At least, that’s the wey it sud be.”

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“Ay; but that’s jist theory, if ye’ll excuse me for sayin’ it, Mistress Wallace.”

“I’ll excuse ye, for I ken ye canna help bein’ a blether, Maister Ogilvy. I never met a man yet that didna gas aboot theories when he hadna the sense or the spunk to practise whit he kent in his hert wis the richt thing to dae.”

“Ye’re vera severe on man,” said Mr. Ogilvy, mopping his brow. “Man is but mortal,” he added in dignified apology.

“An’ mortal stupit forbye! ‘Tak’ aff that hat afore it gi’es ye some affliction o’ the brain.”

Mr. Ogilvy removed his hat, not without a grimace, and laid it on the ground against the stump on which he was seated.

“I doot ye’re markit for life,” said Mrs. Wallace. “Disfeegured through yer ain consate. Eh?”

Smiling ruefully, the grocer rubbed his suffering forehead. “I doot I’ll ha’e to get anither hat, efter a’,” he said.

“Either that or anither heid,” said Mrs. Wallace. “But tha’s no’ the pint we wis speakin’ aboot, Maister Ogilvy,” she went on, becoming serious. “Ye ken whit I mean.”

“Ay; ye mean *Man*. Ye wis speakin’ aboot Man, Mistress Wallace.”

“Tits! Ye’re haverin’! That wisna a pint.

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Man's o' nae consequence. I meant the business about the new jiners."

"Oh, ay."

"An' I want ye to tell David the nicht, Maister Ogilvy. Ye'll obleege me greatly if ye tell him secret-like, for I'm no' wantin' Jess to be vexin' hersel' about it. She's got plenty to think about the noo wi'oot a big trouble like this. . . . Jess is no' jist as weel as I wud like to see her."

"Is she no'?" exclaimed Mr. Ogilvy in a voice of deep concern.

"Oh, I dinna think it's onythin' serious, but she needs to tak' care o' hersel'. Dinna say a word to her or onybody else about it."

"I'll never open ma mooth! But she was fine an' rosy the last time I seen her."

"Rid cheeks isna everythin'. Jess has ower big a hert for her body, an' she——"

"Oh, me! Ye dinna mean that, Mistress Wallace?" he cried, looking shocked.

"Man, man, of course I dinna mean there's onythin' wrang wi' her hert, or her body either," was the sharp reply. "I mean that she's aye fashin' hersel' an' vexin' hersel' about David's affairs as weel as her ain—no' but whit she has a richt to ken about his affairs. But nooadays she's plenty o' her ain to keep her busy, mind an' body; an' whiles I wud like to gi'e David a hint, but I've never managed it yet. It's no'

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often I canna tell a man whit I think, but——”

“’Deed, that’s truth!” said Mr. Ogilvy quite involuntarily.

“But,” she continued, ignoring the remark, “if I wis tellin’ David, he wud be that pit aboot that I doot he wud speak to Jess, an’ maybe frichten her an’ mak’ her waur nor she is.”

“I see, I see,” he said sympathetically. “Weel, Mistress Wallace, I’ll speak to David aboot the new jiners the nicht, an’ I’ll drap a hint for him no’ to mention onythin’ to Mistress Houston in the meantime. I’ll tell him to wait till he gets the job for the new hooses, an’ then gi’e her a fine surprise.”

“Yer hat hasna spiled yer heid efter a’, Maister Ogilvy,” said Mrs. Wallace graciously. “Of course, Jess is boun’ to hear o’ the new jiners afore lang, but the langer we can keep it frae her the better. But I wisht—I wisht David hadna stairtit the gairdenin’ again. I hear folk complainin’ aboot him no’ peyin’ attention to his business.”

“Aw, weel, the man maun ha’e his recreation, as it were. An’ I dinna think Mistress Houston liket him gi’ein’ up his gairdenin’ a’thegither. An’ nae doot the news o’ the opposeetion ’ll gar him pit his best fit furrit.”

“Ye’re rale tender wi’ ither folk’s failin’s,” said Mrs. Wallace, half-mockingly.

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“I’ve kent David Houston since he was a laddie,” said the grocer, after a pause, “an’ I never kent him dae onythin’ that wasna fair an’ kind. He never done a dirty trick, or behaved shabby to onybody; an’ when he does, it’ll be time enough for me to fin’ fau’t wi’ him.”

“Weel, weel,” she said, her voice softening, “I ken ye for a guid freen’, Maister Ogilvy, baith to David an’ masel’.”

Mr. Ogilvy bowed his head, and sat silent, his hands tightly clasped between his knees. “Samuel Ogilvy,” he said to himself, “can ye no’ speak?”

“An’ I hope,” resumed Mrs. Wallace, “ye’ll be a guid freen’ to this wee lassie here when she grows up a bit. I ken ye like weans.”

“Ay,” he said simply. . . . Presently an idea occurred to him, and he drew from his pocket a small package. “It’s for her,” he said, indicating the child, and handing the package to the nurse.

“Whit’s this?” inquired the latter.

“Oh, jist a wheen jujubes, Mistress Wallace.”

“Jujubes?”

“Ay. They’re the finest in ma shop, an’ they wudna hurt the maist delicate digeestion. Ye micht gi’e her yin when she waukens!”

“*Jujubes?*” cried Mrs. Wallace again, and,

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in spite of an effort to the contrary, she broke into merriment.

The grocer stared foolishly.

“Oh, Maister Ogilvy,” she said at last, “ye maun excuse me, but ye canna gi’e jujubes, or ony ither sweeties, to a wean that isna fower month auld—— Oh, dear me! I canna help lauchin’.”

“But she’ll shin be fower month auld, an’ the jujubes ’ll keep fine, if they dinna get damp. An’ if they spile, I’ll bring fresh yins.” There was the slightest trace of offended feeling in his voice.

Mrs. Wallace recovered herself and explained the position. “An’ it wis rale nice o’ ye to think o’ bringin’ the jujubes for this wee lassie, Maister Ogilvy,” she said in conclusion.

“I’m a stupit buddy,” he groaned. “But—but it’s ma misfortune to—to be a single man. I—I—I wish I wasna!” he suddenly gasped.

“If ye’re no’ wantin’ the jujubes back, I’ll keep them masel’,” said Mrs. Wallace calmly.

“Thenk ye, thenk ye,” he stammered. “I’ll be prood if ye’ll accept the jujubes. An’—an’—wud ye—wud ye no’ accept—a—a—onythin’ else, as it were?” Beads formed upon his brow, and speech failed him.

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“Toots! Maister Ogilvy, I’m no’ a great sweetie eater, thenk ye a’ the same. But it’s time the wee lassie wis gaun inside the hoose,” she said, rising. “Ye better tak’ yer smoke till David and Jess get hame. They’ll no’ be lang noo. Ye’ll bide to yer tea, Maister Ogilvy?”

“Na, thenk ye. I—I dinna think I’ll bide the nicht.”

“But ye’ve got to see David, onywey.”

“I forgot. . . . Weel, I’ll bide, thenk ye.” He fumbled for his pipe, keeping his eyes on the ground the while, and Mrs. Wallace with her charge moved away.

Had he looked he would have seen that her eyes were very kindly, although her lips were shut even more firmly than usual.

* * * * *

About nine o’clock Mrs. Wallace and Mr. Ogilvy left Hazel Cottage together.

“Guidnicht!” they both called as they turned from the gate, after which they proceeded at least a furlong in gloomy silence.

“Hoo did David come to ken aboot it?” said the grocer at last.

“It wis the letter that Angus brocht,” she replied shortly.

“Wha was it frae?”



“‘Guid nicht!’ they both called as they turned from the gate.”—PAGE 186



“She perceived, through the mist, a dim, dark monstrous shape like the back of a whale.”—Page 204

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“The contractor, or whatever ye ca’ him. It saved ye breakin’ the bad news, onywey,” she said rather bitterly.

“D’ye think I was gled for that, Mistress Wallace ? ”

“Na, na, Maister Ogilvy. But I’m vexed at David Houston. Ay, an’ I’m angry at him forbye. I wis near cuffin’ his lugs when he passed the letter to Jess, sayin’, ‘There’s a love-letter for ye, ma lass,’ an’ lauchin’ as if the hale thing wis a joke. If he had seen her face when she gaed ower to the winda to read it——” Mrs. Wallace stopped with a sigh, which her companion echoed.

“But ye kin’ o’ lauched yersel’,” he said presently. “An’ ye cried oot that ye wud maybe get the lock pit on yer coal-cellar door at last.”

“That wis jist to keep Jess frae breakin’ doon. Ye’re no’ vera quick at the up-tak’, Maister Ogilvy.”

“Maybe I’m no’,” he admitted. “An’ I wish I kent the meanin’ o’ the hale business. It’s a mystery to me. What did the contractor mean writin’ to tell David that he needna bother tryin’ for the job, as it had a’ been arranged wi’ the new jiners. There’s somethin’ gey queer aboot it. I wunner wha’s buildin’ the hooses. It’s naebody in Kinlochan, or I wud ha’e heard

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lang syne. It wasna fair no' gi'ein' David his chance. There's naebody can touch him for guid wark."

"Ye micht try an' fin' oot wha's buildin' the hooses the morn," said Mrs. Wallace, whose spirits were sinking lower and lower.

"I'll fin' oot the nicht! I'll fin' oot the noo, if I can. Here's the manse, an' I'll speir at the meenister. I mind yinst seein' him crackin' wi' a strange man that was measurin' the grun' for the new hooses. Jist bide a meenit, Mistress Wallace, till I rin up to the door an' prosecute inquiries."

He was not long absent, and he returned short of breath, but able to pant—

"There's twa-three gentlemen in the business, but the chief yin is a Maister Dobbie in Glesca. He's in the gless trade. Eh? Whit's wrang, Mistress Wallace?"

"Everythin'!" she groaned, throwing up her hands. "Ma puir Jess!"

"What ha'e I said, what ha'e I said?" cried the grocer.

Mrs. Wallace became calm. "Never heed the noo, Maister Ogilvy; I'll maybe tell ye anither time."

Mr. Ogilvy nodded gently, and nothing more was said till they reached Mrs. Wallace's gate. "It's no' that I canna trust ye," she said

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abruptly ; “ I’ll tell ye a’ aboot it the morn, if—if I can.”

“ Mistress Wallace,” he returned in a solemn whisper, “ I’m aye at—at yer service, as it were.”

IX

FIGURES, BUT NOT ALL DRY

IN the garden David Houston, bending over a beautifully kept plot of choice pansies, softly whistled his intense satisfaction. "I've never done better," was his inward comment, by which he meant that he had never done so well.

In the parlour his wife, bending over the page of a neatly kept ledger, sighed and murmured, "If I could only tell him some things without telling him everything!"

In the cradle by her side her baby stirred slightly, but did not waken. Her face lightened as she stooped towards the child; then, as she rose again, her mouth took on an expression of determination.

She left the table, and went quietly to the window. For a brief space she watched her man working steadily and happily in the summer evenshine. "Oh, Davie," she whispered to

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herself, "I'm afraid, I'm afraid! . . . If you had only left your heart's desire till it was ready—till you were able to take it and keep it. . . . Perhaps it's my fault. Perhaps I've taken too much on myself. But how could I explain everything now? You would never——"

David straightened himself, in order to get a bird's-eye view of the plot, and caught sight of his wife at the window. He nodded, smiled, pointed proudly at his pansies, and beckoned her to him. She smiled faintly in return, shook her head, and signed to him to come indoors.

He came at once, and entered the parlour gaily and eagerly. "Was ye wantin' me to tak' the Wee Yin for a while?" he whispered. "I'll jist wash ma hauns, an' then I'll——"

"No, no, Davie," said Jess, gently, loving him more for his warm fatherly affection, "Katie's sleeping sound. But I've been having a look at the books, and I—I wanted to ask you about something."

"Jist that, lass," he returned agreeably, trying not to look disappointed. "Weel, I'll shin be feenished ootbye, an' then we'll ha'e a crack aboot the books. Come awa' for a meenit an' see the pansies that'll lift the first prize at the show on Seturday. Come awa', Jess—jist for a meenit. Ye're no' gaun ootbye enough the noo. Never heed the books. They'll keep."

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“They won’t keep themselves,” she said, good-humouredly. “But I want to know one thing before you go out again, Davie,” she went on seriously.

“What’s that ? ”

“Have you given Donald Binnie notice ? ”

“No’ yet, dearie,” he replied, a little uncomfortably.

“Why, Davie ? You said you were going to tell him more than a week ago.”

“Ay. But—but, ye see, Jess, I hadna the hert to tell him. He’s a dacent man, Donald Binnie, an’ he’s served me weel since he cam’ to Kinlochan.”

“I know that,” she freely allowed. “But there’s no work for him just now, is there ? ”

“Aweel, there’s no’ muckle, to tell ye the truth, lass,” he admitted slowly, adding more cheerfully, “but ye never can tell when the wark’ll come again. An’ Donald Binnie’s a dacent man. I wud be vexed to ha’e to tell him I didna need him ony mair. I wud that, Jess ! An’ ye like him fine yersel’, dae ye no’ ? ”

“Of course I do, David. . . . But tell me—What has Donald done to-day ? What was there for him to do ? ”

“Weel, ye see, it was kin’ o’ slack at the shop, an’ I jist tell’t him he micht tak’ a day aff.”

“Oh ! But you gave him a day off yesterday,

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didn't you ? ” said Mrs. Houston, keeping calm with an effort.

“ So I did,” he replied ruefully.

For ten seconds Jess held her tongue. Then she asked—

“ Could you not do all the work that's going just now yourself, Davie ? ”

“ Ay. . . . Ay ; I daursay—if I was neglectin' the gairden,” he said thoughtfully.

“ But if you started earlier in the morning ? ”

“ What about the Wee Yin ? ”

His wife laughed against her better judgment.

“ Is it you that holds Katie, or Katie that holds you in the mornings ? ”

“ Weel, weel, ye ken it's rale nice to ha'e the Wee Yin in yer airms,” he said half laughingly, half apologetically, as he bent over the cradle.

She was disarmed for a moment, but a glance at the ledger on the table was sufficient to bring her back to action.

“ David,” she said firmly, “ you must give Donald notice on Saturday.”

“ The Wee Yin's fine at the sleepin' ! . . . Eh ? What was ye sayin', lass ? ”

“ I said you must give Donald notice on Saturday. Promise ! ”

“ But—but I'll be awa' at the show on Seturday, an' so wull you, Jess.”

“ Then you must tell him on Friday—to-

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morrow. Do you know, David," she continued solemnly, "that for weeks you've been paying Donald more than you've been making yourself?"

Houston stared. "Is that a fac'?" he exclaimed.

"Last week his wages were twice what'll come to you."

"Mercy on us! Is that what the book says?"

"Yes. But I told you a while ago that you couldn't afford to keep Donald."

"I ken, I ken . . . I'm a stupit man an' ill to dae wi'. . . . But I'll see aboot gi'ein' Donald notice. It's a peety, for he's a dacent man, an'——"

"You'll tell him to-morrow?"

"Ay; I'll likely see him the morn—if he doesna tak' anither day aff. I tell't him he didna need to come in the morn unless he had naethin' better to dae. He's got a lass at Fairport, ye ken. But it's like rain the nicht, an' I think he'll be back the morn's mornin'. Are ye no' pleased, Jess?"

Mrs. Houston hesitated, but was not lost.

"Davie," she said calmly, "sit down there." She indicated the chair she had vacated some little time ago.

David smiled inquiringly, but sat down.

She laid a sheet of notepaper and a pen before him, placed the ink-bottle in position, and said:

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“Dear lad, will you do me a great favour?”

“What’s that, Jess?”

“Something that’ll do neither of us any harm. Say you’ll do it.”

He picked up the pen, dipped it, and looked down at the paper. Then he looked up at his wife.

“Ye’re a great wumman, Jess,” he said in a tone of affectionate amusement. “An’ what am I to say to that dacent man, Donald Binnie?”

“Just the truth,” she replied with sudden relief, “the truth that we—that you can’t afford to keep him on.”

“Mphm. That’s the truth, as ye say, Jess, an’ mair’s the peety. If we had got the jiner work o’ thae new hooses o’ Dobbie’s, I wudna ha’e needit to——”

“Yes, yes,” said his wife hurriedly, turning to the window, and gazing at the loch. “But that wasn’t your fault, Davie.”

“I wish I was shair o’ that, lass. I’ve heard talk o’ Maister Dobbie ha’ein’ a spite at me, an’ I canna unnerstaun’ it, for I never did onythin’ to him, excep’ maybe tak’ a bit extra credit noo an’ then. It was hissel’ closed the accoont, ye mind. But——”

“Write your letter, Davie, like a good lad,” she interposed without turning her head. “I

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want to get at the books again, and I suppose you want to get back to the garden before it's dark. . . . I—I'm proud of your pansies, Davie. . . . But you—you won't let Mr. Dobbie or any one else beat you, will you ? ”

“ Nae fears ! ” cried David right cheerfully. “ Ha'e ye anither bit paper ? I've made a muckle blot on this bit, an' I'm no' wantin' to add insult to injury when I'm dismissin' a dacent man.”

Mrs. Houston placed a fresh sheet of notepaper before her husband, who, having made up his mind to the disagreeable but necessary piece of correspondence, applied his hard hand and soft heart to the same without delay.

“ Jess,” he exclaimed, when he had closed and addressed it.

“ Well, Davie ? ”

“ It's no' a vera nice like letter for a lad to fin' waitin' on him when he comes hame frae seein' his lass. Is it ? ”

Jess looked sympathetic. “ No, it isn't, Davie. But what can we do ? You're paying old Angus for doing nothing, and you can't afford to pay Donald too. Besides, Donald's a clever lad, and he'll soon get another place. If I thought old Angus would get another place,” she added with a kindly little laugh, “ I would advise you to part with *him*.”

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“Puir auld Angus! I ken ye wudna pairt wi’ him, Jess!”

“Well, perhaps not. But sometimes I can’t help feeling cross with him. He talks as if *you* couldn’t do without him—as if the business was kept going by him. And he never does a thing, except when Aunt Wallace or I come into the shop, and then he pretends he’s working hard.”

“An’ whiles he does the wrang thing,” remarked David, laughing. “But he did his wark in his time, an’ there’ll be a place for him in the shop as lang as the shop’s mines. But he’s changed a lot since the fire.”

“He’s got much older looking—is that what you mean?”

“Ay. But he’s changed mair nor that. He’s aye pretendin’ he’s hard up.”

“Well, he’s not too well off, is he, Davie?”

“He’s gettin’ the same wage as he used to get, an’ he hasna his sister to keep noo. An’ yet he’s aye jist gaspin’ for his siller on Seturdays, an’ Ogilvy was tellin’ me the ither day that he winna tak’ meat even on the Sawbath, an’ that he’s waur nor ever at his trick o’ gettin’ a smoke for naethin’. Ogilvy thinks he’s becomin’ a miser in his auld age.”

“A miser? Surely not!”

“Weel, I’m jist tellin’ ye, lass. But miser or

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nae miser, Angus 'll draw his wage as lang as I can pey it. . . . That's to say if ma pairtner has nae objections," he added, smiling at her.

"Your partner, Davie?"

"Itherwise yersel'!"

"Am I your partner, Davie?" she asked, half seriously.

"Fine ye ken it! . . . D'ye agree to Angus gettin' his wage?"

"Of course! Do you think I ever grudged it, Davie?"

"Na, na! If it hadna been for you, Angus nicht ha'e been hard up wi'oot ony pretendin'; for, to tell ye the honest truth, wife, *I* grudged him his wage for a guid while efter the fire. But I said to masel', if Jess can forgi'e him, I maun try to dae the same. An' we're no' muckle the waur o' the fire efter a', thenks to yersel', ma dear."

Jess flushed, as she always did at any suggestion of a compliment upon her business abilities, and smiled rather tremulously at her husband. There were many other matters of which she was fain to speak to him, but it was not easy. His cheerfulness, his careless optimism, his open admiration for herself, his good comradeship—all these made it very hard for her to discuss the sordid matters next, but not in, her heart.

"Is there onythin' else ye wantit to speak

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about, Jess ? ” inquired David, after a glance through the window at the setting sun.

“ No ; nothing just now, Davie. It’ll keep till you get through the pansies,” she replied, after a short hesitation.

“ I’ll no’ be lang at the pansies, an’ it’ll shin be dark. If there’s onything in the books ye want to speak about, I’ll be ready in hauf-an-’oor. But dinna fash yer bonny heid ower the books, ma lass. Come ootbye wi’ me, an’ we’ll leave the door on the sneck, an’ ye’ll shin hear if the Wee Yin waukens. . . . Are ye comin’ ? ”

“ Not to-night, Davie. I’ve plenty to do in the house, and——”

“ That’s what ye’re aye tellin’ me ! ”

“ It’s just the truth.”

“ Maybe that’s the reason I dinna like it. I whiles think ye’re ower hard wrocht i’ the hoose, Jess. If that’s the case, I’ll——”

“ No, no, no ! ” she answered lightly. “ I’ll complain when I’m overwrought. Away to the garden, or the light ’ll be gone, and then you’ll have to look after your pansies instead of Katie in the morning.”

“ That’s exceedin’ly likely ! ” he retorted with pleasant irony, as he left the parlour.

Jess drew forward the hood of the cradle, and lit the lamp, for the daylight was failing in the room. She picked up the letter her

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husband had written to his assistant, and carried it into the kitchen, placing it upright on the chimney-piece there, so that it might not be forgotten in the morning.

“Davie’s sure to see it when he’s at his breakfast,” she thought. “I don’t want to bother him speaking about it again.”

Returning to the parlour, she first soothed the child, who was showing signs of restlessness, and then seated herself at the table and resumed her examination of the ledger, from which she was drawing up a rough balance-sheet and profit-and-loss statement. Her husband’s present state of affairs was vastly different from that first one which she had sighed to set on paper two years ago. The ends that no stretching of the most hopeful imagination could then bring together were now tied and with something to spare. David Houston was solvent, and not barely so.

And yet Jess considered the cheerful figures before her with anxiety. It was as if, having done all she could to make ends meet and tie the knot, she saw the knot already giving and the ends slipping slowly but surely apart. How could she secure the knot before it was too late? Had she thought and laboured in vain? Was her great idea, her sweet secret desire, her never-slumbering hope, to come to nothing? What

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could she do to stay the dull falling-away of David's trade and bring back the recent bright prosperity ?

She could tell her husband everything—everything she had done, everything she had endured through the past two years. That would rouse him, she knew, to the strong effort of which, she was convinced, he was capable. But in what way would it rouse him ? Through tender love ? Through hot pride ? Through pure *shame* ?

Ah, no ! She could not bear the thought of her good man shamed before her. Nothing was worth that—not even her great idea. Moreover—it suddenly flashed on her—if she told him all, her great idea would become her ruined hope.

“I can't give in ! I won't give in !” she murmured. “I don't want Davie to be sorry for me,” she thought a moment later. “I don't want him to be bitterly vexed with himself. I must rouse him without hurting him ; I must be patient with him ; I must try to get him to take things seriously without seeming to take them too seriously myself . . . Oh ! if he could only have another year like the last, I don't think I'd need to—to hide things from him any more. Only one more year, and then he—— No ! I don't care if it takes five years,

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ten years, I won't give in!" she repeated firmly to herself, and bent steadily over her work.

She started up, listening. She fancied she heard a faint cry outside. She rose to go to the window, when David came hurriedly into the parlour.

"What is——" she began, seeing his face white.

"There's a man in the water oot thonder!" he said rapidly. "I'll be back in a wee while."

He was gone.

Jess hastened to the window, and saw him running out at the gate. The hedge hid him for a few seconds, and then she saw him leaping down the rocky shore. A thick haze hung heavily over the loch, and out of it came the cry she had already heard. Something seemed to grip her heart, and a sickly chill came over her body.

"Davie!" she cried stupidly, "come back, come back!"

She beheld him wading into the loch—deeper—deeper—and somehow she could not move.

A little cry from the cradle broke the spell of horror that seemed to have been cast upon her. She turned swiftly, caught up her baby, wrapped the tiny mortal in a heavy blanket, and fled from the house into the summer dusk, not calling, but pantingly whispering her husband's name.

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From the road she could see nothing, but when she reached the water's edge—how she passed over the rough beach, burdened and without stumbling, she could never afterwards tell—she perceived, through the mist, a dim, dark monstrous shape like the back of a whale, and, her nerves giving way, she screamed loudly.

Some one—she does not know who it was to-day—came to her side and relieved her of her baby, patting her on the shoulder, endeavouring to soothe her.

“What's that? What's that?” she cried wildly, peering and pointing.

“That's the boat, upside doon. Keep up yer hert, Mistress Houston. Yer man'll no' get droondit.”

People began to collect on the beach where Jess stood, and not far away a couple of men had launched a small boat, and were pulling to the rescue.

Then, after what seemed an age to the distracted young wife and her excited and sympathetic neighbours, two heads appeared and moved towards the shore. A shout of congratulation rose from the little group, and presently David, finding the ground, rose and came safely to land, bearing the semi-conscious, almost water-logged body of a young man.

He dropped his burden into ready arms,



“ Bearing the semi-conscious, almost water-logged body of a young man.”—PAGE 204



“She was in his arms crying tearlessly as if her heart would break.”—PAGE 206

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saying to his wife, "Dinna fash yersel', ma dear. I'll be back in a jiffy. There's anither yin hingin' on to the boat." And he prepared to re-enter the water, when the voices of a dozen people informed him that the rescuers were already nearing the overturned craft. And sure enough there were now two dim shapes in the mist, and from one of them came the cheery shout, "We've got him!"

David took his wife's hand, and it was as if she had received an immediate and powerful stimulant.

"Come and change your clothes at once, Davie," she said. "Come at once! The young man is being taken care of."

"But wull ye no' get him up to the hoose, Jess?"

"No, no, Davie. We'll luk efter him. Ye've plenty to dae lukin' efter yersel'," put in a couple of neighbours, eyeing him proudly.

"Come, Davie, come! You'll get cold if you stand here," said his wife. "Thank you kindly," she went on, taking her baby from the woman who had been holding her. "I don't know—I don't remember how you came to have Katie, but thank you. . . . Davie, run to the house and strip at once!"

David obeyed, and she followed him as swiftly as she could. Near the gate she encountered Mrs. Wallace.

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The latter neither asked questions nor offered any observations.

“I’ll haud the wean. Awa’ to yer man,” she said briskly.

Mrs. Houston resigned her charge gratefully, and flew after her husband. She found him in front of the kitchen fire, lighting a clay pipe.

“It’s a guid thing I hadna on ma coat”—he had been gardening in his shirt sleeves—“or I wudna ha’e had a bit dry tobacco left,” he remarked. “Ye wasna feart, was ye, dearie?”

“Get off your wet clothes,” she cried. “Quick, quick, quick!” and stamped her foot.

The next moment his pipe lay shattered on the floor, and she was in his arms, crying tearlessly as if her heart would break. “Oh, Davie, you — you splendid man!” she sobbed. . . . “But change your clothes!” she cried, freeing herself.

“I doot ye’ll ha’e to change yer ain noo,” he said, with a laugh, pointing to her wet blouse. “Quick, quick, quick!” he mocked her gently, and stamped his foot so that the dishes on the dresser rattled.

* * * * *

“Saut water winna hurt onybody,” he observed when he had got his dry garments, and set his other pipe agoing. “Dinna fash

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yersel', Jess. I'm as richt's the mail! Whaur's the Wee Yin?"

"Aunt Wallace has got her in the parlour. I've put a fire on there, so go and get toasted."

"A fire this time o' the year?"

"Tits! Davie, don't ask questions, and you'll be told no lies!" she cried with affected impatience. "Away to the parlour, till I get you some supper."

"But I've had ma supper."

"Well, you've got to take it again. Go when I ask you, Davie!"

"I think I'll gang roon to Dugald McCall's, an' see hoo the twa chaps is gettin' on. The yin I brocht ashore was gey faur through, puir lad."

"You're not to go out to-night, Davie. Just ask Aunt Wallace to get word for you. Away, and see if Katie's sleeping."

"'Deed, ay!" he returned agreeably, and left the kitchen.

Jess dropped into a chair and sat bowed and motionless for five minutes. Her nerves were in a horrid jangle, and when at last she rose to prepare the supper she felt as if she had lived many years in the past hour.

And all at once a dreadful terror seized her, and she fled from the kitchen to the parlour door. . . . Ah, thank God! all was well! Davie was

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there safe and sound—talking and laughing to the “Wee Yin.”

She went back to the kitchen, took up a plate, let it slip from her fingers, and laughed softly over the ruin. . . . But when she spied the remains of David’s pipe, the tears filled her eyes and overflowed and fell, and fell, and fell . . . mercifully.

* * * * *

When David expressed himself anxious as to the condition of the victims of the boating accident, Mrs. Wallace readily offered to step along the road to make inquiries, and accepted David’s apology for not going himself with the remark—

“Haud yer tongue, man! Ye’re better mind-in’ the wean whaur ye are. Ye’re no’ wantin’ to get the newmania, or whatever they ca’ it, an’ ha’e Jess rookin’ Maister Ogilvy o’ a’ his mustard for plaisters for the next twa-three weeks. Na, na! Ye’ve had plenty gallivantin’ for yin day, David! Whit’s that ye say? Feart for the dark? *Me?* Havers! Them as isna feart for the licht isna feart for the dark, espaycially when they cairry a wee parasole like this yin.” Here she smiled grimly, and flourished a large and heavy-looking umbrella. “Mind the wean, an’ mind yersel’, David, an’ I’ll bring



“Ye’ve had plenty of gallivantin’ for yin day, David !”—PAGE 208



“The lady left the counter without another word.”—PAGE 222

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ye word as quick as ma legs can cairry me. I'll see Jess when I get back."

Mrs. Wallace had scarcely passed the garden gate, when she was hailed with the inquiry—

"Hoo's David, Mistress Wallace?"

"Mercy me! Is that you, Maister Ogilvy? Ye aye turn up like a bad saxpence! David's fine, thenk ye for speirin', but he's fashin' hissel' aboot the lads that got near droondit, an' I'm jist awa' to see hoo they're keepin'. The stupit fellas deserve to be droondit, but I hope they'll no' get the cauld, puir lads. Weel, guid-nicht to ye, Maister Ogilvy." And she hurried on.

"Bide a meenit, if ye please, Mistress Wallace. I've jist been at McCall's wi' a botle o' the best, for I thocht the lads wud be the better o' a wee——"

"Whit wey did ye no' tell me that afore? Weel? Whit aboot the lads?" she demanded.

"I discovered they was teetotalers, but Dugald McCall mislaid the botle, as it were, an' I had to come awa' wi'oot it. Ay, an'——"

"But are the puir lads gettin' better?"

"They was eatin' toastit cheese when I left, no' ha'ein' had their suppers afore they gaed oot in the boat; an' frae the quantity o' the toastit cheese bein' conshumed, I was disposed to form the opeenion that——"

"Never heed yer opeenion the noo! The lads

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is no' muckle the waur o' their drookin' ? Is that whit ye mean, eh ? ”

“ Jist that. That'll be aboot it, onywey. But, Mistress Wallace——”

“ Weel ? ” she inquired impatiently, as the grocer paused and smiled mysteriously.

“ Mistress Wallace, what dae ye think I fun' oot the nicht ? ”

“ Yersel', I suppose.”

“ Na ; but I'm serious.”

“ Whit are ye grinnin' at ? ”

“ I'm smilin' seriously, as it——”

“ Weel, ye sudna.”

“ It's wi' serious satisfaction,” said Mr. Ogilvy, good-naturedly. “ Wha dae ye think the twa young men happen to be ? ” he asked, not without excitement.

“ Wha ? ”

“ They're the twa new jiners frae Paisley, that are gaun to set up in opposection to David Houston ! What think ye o' that ? ”

“ Are ye shair ? ”

“ I'll sweer to it ! They arrived at Kinlochan the day, an' celebrated the occasion wi' an' evenin'-cruise, so to speak, in a sma' boat ; but Paisley no' bein' what ye wud ca' a seafarin' place, they didna ken hoo——”

“ I'll awa' an' tell David an' Jess,” said Mrs. Wallace, interrupting the grocer's flow of detail.

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“ But I wud like to ha’e a crack wi’ ye the morn, Maister Ogilvy,” she added pleasantly.

“ I’ll bide here for ye the nicht,” he returned eagerly.

“ I said the morn.”

“ A’ I can say is that I’ll bide here till ye come oot frae Hazel Cottage, for it’s ower late for ye to gang hame yersel’, Mistress Wallace,” he replied stoutly.

“ Then a’ *I* can say, Maister Ogilvy,” she retorted, “ is jist yin word—*Guid-nicht!* ”

“ But—but——”

Mrs. Wallace, however, merely nodded and entered the gate.

Mr. Ogilvy walked away rapidly—and came back slowly.

* * * * *

Mrs. Wallace went straight to the kitchen and found Jess about to dish a tempting little hot supper. She told her niece what she had heard, but told it without comment, for there was something about the young woman’s face that disturbed her, and made her wish to get home and consider matters. So when Jess pressed her to stay to supper, she refused briefly, and said she would find her way from the house alone. The supper being at a critical stage in the dishing thereof, Jess could not leave it, and her aunt, after bidding her good-night much less

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tenderly than she felt, left the kitchen, and made her way to the front door.

But she halted at the door of the parlour, and, opening it softly, peeped in. Katie was newly asleep, and David was still by the cradle. Mrs. Wallace beckoned him to her, and he came stealthily.

“The lads are gettin’ on fine,” she whispered. “Nae doot ye’ll hear mair aboot them the morn,” she went on, adding to herself, “an’ for a while to come. But they’re no’ muckle the waur.”

“I’m gled o’ that,” he said, looking pleased. “D’ye ken what lads they are?” he asked. “I dinna ken their faces, an’ there wasna a great deal o’ time for us gettin’ acquaint.”

“Jess’ll tell ye aboot them. I maun gang hame. But, Davie—Davie,” her voice softened wonderfully, “I’m rale prood o’ ye, man! An’—an’ tak’ unco guid care—dinna say I said it, mind!—but tak’ unco guid care o’ yer wife, Davie.”

Before he could speak she closed the door quietly between them, and a moment later left the cottage.

The grocer, at a discreet distance, walked behind her until she reached her home.

X

MR. OGILVY HAS CUSTOMERS

MISS PERK, having recited a little list of groceries from the page of a small note-book, lingered at the counter and gazed about her as if trying to recollect something she had omitted.

“Naethin’ else the day, ma’am?” inquired Mr. Ogilvy politely, and moistened the point of his pencil. “Thae finnan haddies is new in, an’ so is the sausages. The sausages is vera fine—vera fine indeed. In fac’, the meenister’s leddy was in gettin’ a bunch the day, an’ she said the last yins she had was jist perfection; an’ the leddy that’s bidin’ wi’ her the noo—a bonny young leddy, an’ that nice an’ free—said they was simply divine!”

“A word that should never be employed in referring to a mere article of food,” remarked Miss Perk coldly.

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“Weel, weel, the young leddy’s language was maybe a wee thing extravagant, as it were,” the grocer admitted mildly, “but it’s no’ for me to objec’ to a complimentary observation on ony o’ ma proveesions. As lang as language is no’ profane in a sweerin’ sense, I can let it pass. But I mind bein’ rale horrified yinst when I was in the toon an’ gaed into the station baur—or, to be exac’, the railway restewrant—for a gless o’ wh—leemonade; an’ I wasna richt inside the door afore I heard a young man—a dacent, respectable-lukin’ young man—cryin’ oot to the waiter for deevil’s kidneys, an——”

“Mr. Ogilvy!”

“I beg your paurdon, ma’am, for usin’ the word afore ye, but I was tryin’ to illustrate to ye the—— Are ye no’ for ony eggs the day, ma’am?” he asked, realizing that his conversation was not being appreciated.

“Not to-day, thank you. I’m sorry to say the last eggs I had from you were not up to the mark, Mr. Ogilvy,” said Miss Perk, continuing to gaze about her.

“No’ up to the merk?” he exclaimed. “I’m shair I canna conceive sic a thing! Are ye certain, ma’am, that the eggs cam’ frae here?”

“My cook told me so.”

“What was the taste like, if ye please, ma’am?” he inquired in a tone respectful yet dignified.

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“I cannot tell you that, as personally I never eat eggs,” said Miss Perk.

“Weel,” said Mr. Ogilvy after a short pause, “eggs is things that nae human bein’ can guarantee, an’ I’m no’ gaun to perjure masel’ wi’ sayin’ that I never had the misfortune to sell a dootfu’ yin ; but I wud jist like to ask ye if yer cook is new to Kinlochan, ma’am.”

“Yes. She has only been with me a fortnight,” the lady replied, ceasing to gaze about her and fixing a look of inquiry on the grocer.

“An’ she cam’ frae the toon, I preshume.”

“Yes. But why——”

The grocer drew himself up with a smile of satisfaction. “Thenk ye, ma’am, for tellin’ me. It’s jist as I suspected. Yer cook, puir buddy, wasna used to ma eggs. The freshness wud be strange to her. There’s a great difference atween an egg laid at a distance an’ an egg laid locally, as it were. Wull I no’ jist send ye hauf a dizzen, ma’am ? ”

“Not to-day, thank you,” Miss Perk returned. “By the way,” she continued, coming to her point at last, “I was calling at Hazel Cottage on my way here.”

“Was ye ? ”

“I understand you are a friend of the Houstons,” she went on cautiously.

“I’m prood to say I am. He’s a fine chap,

JESS & CO

is David Houston ; an' as for his guid wife, it's a peety there's no' mair like her on the shore— an' on the earth for that maitter. 'Deed, ma'am, every time she comes into ma shop I wish I was her fayther. She's that bonny an' blithe an' kind ! An' she's clever forbye ! It was jist the ither day I got fankled wi' some o' ma accoonts—I was thinkin' o' takin' stoke, an' I hadna tried it for seeven year—an' I was groanin', hauf dementit, ower a dizzen an' eleeven tins o' lobster, finest quality, at seevenpence three-fardens the tin, less five per cent——”

“ But——”

“ An' jist then,” proceeded the grocer, too interested in his own recital to notice the interruption, “ jist then she cam' into the shop as brisk's a bee, an' speirt what was distressin' me. ‘ A dizzen an' eleeven tins o' lobster,’ says I. An' she lauched an' lauched till I couldna help lauchin' masel', though I didna perceive the pint o' the joke till a wee while efter. Ye see, ma'am, she let on she thocht I had ett the dizzen an' eleeven tins o' lobster. That was the pint o' the joke. But at the time I didna perceive it, an' I jist said to her that takin' stoke was an invention of the d—evil yin an'——”

“ Every business man ought to take stock at least once a year,” put in Miss Perk.

“ That's true, ma'am, that's true. But it's a

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sair job when Providence has made ye a grocer. When Mistress Houston cam' into the shop I was gettin' dazed, an' I seemed to behold naethin' but lobsters and vulgar fractions dancin' afore me. But in aboot twa meenits she had workit oot the calculation for me, an' I was masel' again ! An' she cam' back the next day an' workit oot a lot mair sums that wud ha'e turned the schulemaister peery-heidit. Ay, did she ! Aw, she's a clever lass, an' David Houston's the lucky lad to get her ! Are ye no' for ony smoked ham the day, ma'am ? I've some supremely fine——”

“Not to-day, thank you. I was going to ask you if you knew whether David Houston's business was being affected by the young men who came to Kinlochan recently,” said Miss Perk, adding, “Of course you know I take a great interest in the young couple, and I put the same question to Mrs. Houston to-day, but I must say I found her rather reticent.”

The grocer scratched his nose before he replied.

“Weel, ma'am,” he said cautiously, “seein' that I've never pit the question masel', I'm no' in the poseetion for to answer it. But for ma pairt, I dinna think the twa young men'll pit David Houston's business up nor doon. They've jist got the yin job, ye ken—the new hooses.”

“But it must have been a blow to David

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Houston not getting that large piece of work."

"He's got plenty wi'oot that."

"Indeed! I understand he had to dismiss his man Binnie some time ago."

"Ay; but Binnie'll be comin' back, an' anither man wi' him, next week," checking an exultant chuckle with a violent cough. "Ye see, ma'am, David Houston has got the contract for the new store-hoose at the pierheid, an' there's twa-three ither nice jobs that'll come his wey afore the year's oot. Aw, I wudna disturb masel' aboot the Houstons, if I was you, ma'am."

"I'm very glad to learn the prospects are so good, Mr. Ogilvy. I had heard that the new building at the pier was to go to the new-comers when they had finished with Mr. Dobbie's houses. In fact, Mr. Dobbie told me so himself."

"Ye ken Maister Dobbie, ma'am?" quietly asked Mr. Ogilvy.

"I happened to meet him one day when I was having a glance at his new houses—very nice little flats they are—quite superior to the present tenements in Kinlochan. I'm sure the people in the village will want to remove as soon as possible. Of course I don't know Mr. Dobbie personally, but from what he said I should imagine he would make a good landlord."

"Oh, I've nae doot he'll get his flets filled—in time, ma'am. I heard the ither day that

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Tousie Tam was thinkin' o' takin' yin o' them. Tousie Tam was a dishevelled but cheerful, half-witted fellow, who occasionally made his bed in Kinlochan outhouses.

Miss Perk was about to reprimand the grocer for unbecoming levity, but before she could speak he continued—

“In fac', I believe Tam met Maister Dobbie on the road an' speirt the rent. Tam maun ha'e his joke, puir chap; but I understaun' Maister Dobbie got an awfu' rid face, for there was a lot o' folk listenin'.”

“Of course,” said Miss Perk, changing the subject, “the new-comers will have quite a friendly feeling towards David Houston after his gallant act on the evening of their arrival.”

“Freenly? Oh, ma'am, it's mair like brith-erly! The twa Wilkies an' David Houston are as thick as onythin', an' as for opposeetion atween them, ye micht as weel luk for a naval battle atween a pair o' ma kippers an' a finnan haddie! I think I mentioned the fac' that the finnan haddies was mair nor usual deleecious the day, an' that the meenister's leddy—Na! it was the sausages she referred to.”

“So you think that the Wilkies will not interfere with David Houston's business?”

“I think they'll no'! Forbye, ma'am, the shop they've set up is jist temporary, so to speak.”

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“You mean that they will leave Kinlochan when they have finished their work at Mr. Dobbie’s houses ? ”

“No’ bein’ a soothsayer, as it were, ma’am, I wudna like to express masel’ in sic a definite fashion,” said Mr. Ogilvy, fearing that possibly he was already expressing himself too freely. “But whatever they dae, it’ll be fair. Marmalade’s no’ the only guid thing that comes oot o’ Paisley. An’ so ye needna fash yersel’ about David Houston an’ his guidwife, ma’am, if ye’ll alloo me the leeberty o’ sayin’ it.”

Miss Perk smiled the least bit unpleasantly. “You seem to have an extensive knowledge of what passes in the district, Mr. Ogilvy,” she remarked.

The grocer grinned modestly and shook his head. “It’s little I ken,” he replied innocently, “for I’m no’ vera guid at askin’ questions.”

If there was any suggestion in his words, Miss Perk did not observe it, for she immediately resumed her quest for information.

“I suppose David Houston has made some arrangement with the Wilkies,” she said, eyeing Mr. Ogilvy searchingly.

“Arrangement, ma’am ? ”

“Yes. Some arrangement by which they are not to interfere with his business. They could hardly refuse to agree after——”

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But she had touched the elderly man's loyalty—touched it to the quick. He reddened, but met her gaze steadily.

“Ma'am,” he said, with a hint of contempt in his tone, “David Houston wudna tak' advantage o' anither man if the ither man owed him a dizzen lives instead o' yin. David Houston's no' that kind. He's no' like the laddie that caught his wee sister stealin' the jam, an' tell't her he wudna ha'e her poachin' on *his* preserves. Na! There's nae mair arrangement atween David Houston an' the Wilkies the day nor there was afore they left Paisley.”

“How can you know?” demanded Miss Perk, irritated at the rebuff.

“I jist ken, ma'am,” he answered stolidly. “Of course,” he added, “I canna prove it—in the meantime, onywey; but ye'll see for yersel' later on that Samuel Ogilvy can weegh characters as weel as groceries. Ay!” Here the grocer pursed up his mouth and struck an attitude with his arms folded. Had Miss Perk known him better she would have understood that it was dangerous to attempt further inquisition.

“Perhaps you will kindly inform me,” she began.

“Excuse me, ma'am, but I'm oot o' information. Naethin' left but proveesions o' the best quality,” he returned with a tight grin.

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The grin exasperated the lady. "And impertinence," she supplemented in a low voice.

"Peppermints?" he inquired politely. "Wud ye like the ornar' kind or the dooble-strong?"

"I said impertinence," cried she, losing her temper.

"An *I* said ornar' kind or dooble-strong," he retorted, boiling inwardly, but retaining the tight grin. "Ye're welcome to either, no' that I think ye're needin' ony."

"You forget yourself!" exclaimed Miss Perk with awesome majesty, gathering up her skirts.

The grocer was not fear-stricken, but a sensation of shame at having lost control of his tongue came to him.

"Aw, weel, ma'am," he began in a tone of defence rather than of apology, "ye micht con-seeder ma feelin's——"

The lady, however, left the counter without another word, but at the door she turned, and in a freezing voice said—

"I find I shall not require the articles I ordered to-day, and I shall be obliged if you will render your account immediately, and ask your messenger to call for two empty biscuit tins and six empty orangeade bottles."

She stepped from the doorway as if she were shaking the dust of the shop from her feet, and



“Is’t lawn tennis or manslaughter!”—PAGE 223



“She cam’ oot wi’ her heid up, like a hen takin’ a drink, but no’ as happy-like.”—PAGE 227

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left Mr. Ogilvy gaping—there is no other word for it—over the counter.

For nearly a minute he stood motionless. Then suddenly his jaws set, and raising his clenched fist above his head he smote the counter such a blow that the structure trembled, and a lofty tower of tins, which he had carefully erected that morning, tottered near its base and crashed in ruins on the outer floor. Three large tins which had formed the base remained, and with a grunt of rage he caught them up and hurled them after the others just as Mrs. Wallace entered the shop.

“Whit kin’ o’ gemm is this ye’re playin’ at?” she demanded, halting a yard away from the counter. “Is’t lawn tennis or manslaughter?”

Speechless and perspiring with shame, Mr. Ogilvy bowed his head and fumbled with his ink-pot.

“Whit’s ado, man?” she went on severely. “If ye’re jist practeesin’ for the shows, ye sud shut yer shop afore ye begin. I’ve nae ambeetion to get kilt wi’ a tin o’ corned beef, an’ never even get a taste o’ ’t. That’s no’ the wey to keep yer customers. . . . Tits, man! Luk whit ye’re daein’ wi’ the ink! Sic a mess!”

“Oh, me!” groaned the grocer, laying down the pot and mopping up the flood with wrapping paper. “Oh, me!”

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“Maister Ogilvy,” said Mrs. Wallace firmly, “wull ye be pleased to explain whit a’ this cairry-on means ? Are ye clean daft or are ye jist no’ weel ? ”

“ Oh, me ! ”

“ Oh, me, yer granny’s mutch ! Whit d’ye mean heavin’ aboot yer guid corned beef as if it wis dirt, forbye near crippin’ yer best customer, if no’ killin’ her fatally, for life ? Eh ? ”

Mr. Ogilvy at last pulled himself together. “ It—it was a—a kin’ o’ substitute for sweerin’, as it were,” he said feebly.

“ A gey expensive substitute ! ” she remarked with a snort.

“ Aw, Mistress Wallace, ye—ye canna conceive what I’ve come through,” he murmured, wiping his forehead with his apron.

“ Ye luk as if ye had come through a patent mangle.”

“ That’s the wey I feel, onywey,” he returned seriously. “ An’ if I hadna had the presence o’ mind, as it were, to fling doon thae three tins o’ corned beef, shuperior quality, I wud ha’e been compelled to express masel’ in shockin’ language. It was better to sacrifice ma corned beef nor ma tongue.”

“ Tongue bein’ dearer nor corned beef,” put in Mrs. Wallace.

“ I meant the tongue in ma mooth,” said the

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grocer, looking hurt. "It's a puir, stammerin' thing, but it'll never be devoted to sweerin' if I can help it."

"Ye maun gang through a heap o' tins if ye're ta'en that wey frequent-like," she observed, picking one from the floor. "Whit's the price o' this yin ?"

"Seeven-pence-ha'penny."

"But it's bashed. I'll gi'e ye saxpence. Ye wudna ha'e the face to sell it to onybody like that."

"Na. An' I wudna like to sell it to yersel', Mistress Wallace, even at the maist drastic reduction," he replied.

"Och, I'm no' heedin' aboot the bashes. I ken hoo they cam' there. Here's anither," she stooped and picked up a second tin. "I'll tak' this yin tae."

"Na, na. I've been affrontit enough the day wi'oot acceptin' yer chairity, Mistress Wallace."

"Haud yer tongue. I'm for the beef. But ye best come roon an' gether up yer tins. Some of them's no' that bashed, an' ye'll maybe be able to pass them aff on some o' yer customers that ha'e wake sicht."

"Weel," said Mr. Ogilvy, as he came round from behind the counter. "I'll gi'e ye the twa for ninepence, an' I'll no' tak' a farden mair."

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“I doot ye’re on the road to ruin,” she observed, and proceeded to help him to collect the tins and set them together in an orderly pile.

“A man never losses his temper wi’oot lossin’ somethin’ else,” she remarked sagely.

“That’s an agonisin’ fac’,” he returned humbly. “I—I’m sair vexed ye seen the deplorable exhibition o’ ma angry passions, Mistress Wallace,” he added, bending over the floor. “I’m sayin’ I’m sair vexed.”

“Oh, dinna fash yersel’. Yer angry passions made nae odds to me. I wis jist thenkfu’ ye didna strike me.”

“If I had struck *you*, Mistress Wallace, if I had struck *you*,” he continued excitedly, “I wud deserve to be drawn an’ quartered an’ hanged on a giblet, and——”

“On a whit? A giblet?”

“Aw, I meant gibbet.”

“Weel, Maister Ogilvy, ye’ve evidently no’ got back the command o’ yer tongue yet, so if ye’ll tak’ yer place on the ither side o’ the coonter, I’ll dae the speakin’.”

The grocer retired to the position indicated. “I hope ye’re no’ offendit, Mistress Wallace,” he said sadly.

“If I wis, I wudna be waitin’ here for ye to tak’ doon an important order. . . . Weel, ye best

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begin wi' pittin' doon the twa tins o' corned beef."

Having seen all her requirements recorded, Mrs. Wallace abruptly put the question :

"Whit wis she sayin' to ye to get up yer dander ? "

"Wha ? "

"Ye ken fine."

"Ye mean Miss Perk," he stammered.

"Jist that. Whit wis she sayin' to gar ye behave like a ragin' lunatic ? "

"But hoo d'ye ken it was her ? "

"Man, she kep' me frae comin' into the shop for near hauf an 'oor, an'——"

"Aw, I wish ye had come in, Mistress Wallace," the grocer fervently sighed.

"Ye've gotten plenty damage wi'oot her an' me addin' mair," said the other with a grim chuckle. "Na, na ! I wisna comin' in when she wis there, so I had a crack wi' postie till she cam' oot. She cam' oot wi' her heid up, like a hen takin' a drink, but no' as happy-like. Wis she gi'ein' ye a lectur, Maister Ogilvy ? "

Mr. Ogilvy shook his head.

"Wis she makin' complaints ? "

"She was. But I nicht ha'e tholed that. It was her inquiries that bate me. Oh, me ! the curiosity o' thon wumman is somethin' stupendous ! She seemed to be seekin' information

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as if she was hungerin' for it—strivin' for to draw it oot o' me."

"Whit wis she wantin' to ken? The whole-sale prices o' yer groceries, or yer age, or yer——"

"She was speirin' aboot David Houston's affairs," he replied, and briefly related his experience.

"I micht ha'e kent that," said Mrs. Wallace, with a wag of her head. "She's been at Jess twice this week, and Jess thinks she wis offendit the last time at no' gettin' a' the answers she wantit."

"But what business has she wi' David's affairs?"

"Speir somethin' easier, Maister Ogilvy. But it's naethin' new. She's been that wey since Jess got mairrit. She's been curious aboot a lot o' folk since I cam' to Kinlochan—she wis curious aboot masel' yinst, jist *yinst*, though—but she's never been curious aboot onybody like Jess."

"It's maist mysterious," said the grocer, drawing a long breath: "yin o' thae things that may be said to baffle the keenest intellectual investigation. Ay!"

"Baffle yer Aunty Kate! Ye've been readin' mair o' thae detective stories!"

"It has been said by them as is competent to gi'e an opeenion that detective stories are vera

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guid for trainin' the mind to conseeder problems," said Mr. Ogilvy, nettled into dignity.

"Mercy me! Then ye canna ha'e read suffeecient, Maister Ogilvy," she retorted crushingly. "But," she continued seriously and with less asperity, "I've been thinkin' about Miss Perk, an' I've got a——"

"A clue!"

"I've got a——"

"A theory, Mistress——"

"Can ye no' keep quate? I've got a notion."

"A notion, Mistress Wallace?"

"Ay. D'ye no' ken whit a notion is? . . . Weel, if ye'll haud yer tongue, I'll tell ye whit *I* think. In the first place, ye ken I wudna say a guid word for onybody if I cud help it; an' in the second place I dinna like thon Miss Perk ony better nor she likes me. *But* I think *she* is rale fond o' Jess, though she has a gey stupit wey o' showin' her fondness; an' forbye that, I think she's got it into her heid—an' canna get it oot either—that David's affairs is in a bad wey. Noo, Maister Ogilvy, whit think ye o' that notion?"

"I—I think ye're an exceedin' fair-mindit wumman," replied the grocer, "an' yer theory, or notion, is—is unco nice. I jist wish *I* had thocht o' it a wee while syne."

"Na, na! Ye wis faur better to dae as ye

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did. Miss Perk's no' gaun to help Jess by gaun roon Kinloch, speirin' aboot David's affairs," said Mrs. Wallace.

"I'm shair I tried for to show her that David's affairs was flourishin', but she wudna believe me. She——"

"Ay; I tell't ye she has gotten it into her heid, an' canna get it oot. She's a stupit buddy, for she nicht ha'e kent at the vera beginnin' that a young lass, new mairrit, an' wi' ony speerit, wudna pit up wi' ony leddy aye pokin' her nose into her man's affairs, no' even if she kent the leddy meant weel."

"D'ye no' think she's maybe gotten a spite at Jess noo?"

"No' a real spite. I think if Jess wis ever needin' her help, she wud gi'e it quick an' kindly. But she's wild at Jess the noo for bein' independent. Hooever, we'll maybe see if I'm richt someday. . . . Whit did ye say she wis sayin' aboot thon penny masher Dobbie?"

Mr. Ogilvy supplied the details in full, finishing up with the hope that he had not said too much to Miss Perk.

"Ye nicht ha'e been mair discreet wi'oot bein' ta'en for a complete dummy," Mrs. Wallace replied. "But I dinna think ye've done muckle damage. That wis a guid joke about Tousie Tam," she laughed. "I'll ha'e to gi'e him jeely

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on his piece the next time he comes to ma door. . . . Weel, ha'e ye had a crack wi' the Wulkies since I seen ye ? ”

“ Ay, Mistress Wallace, but of course I was carefu' what I said. But them and me's gettin' rale pack. They're dacent lads, an' they're baith that ta'en up wi' David an' Jess. What dae you think o' them yersel' noo that ye've got better acquaint wi' them ? ”

“ I think thon jumpin'-jake Dobbie cudna ha'e pickit oot waur men for his dirty wark.”

“ I'm gled to hear ye say that ! ”

“ I wis speakin' to the lads the day, an' they're comin' to their teas at ma hoose on Friday. I'll be pleased to see yersel', Maister Ogilvy,” she added graciously, “ if ye can thole shuttin' yer shop sae early.”

“ I wud shut ma shop at ony 'oor for sic pleasure,” he returned, beaming with delight. “ It's rale kind o' ye to invite me, Mistress Wallace, an' I'll be richt prood to attend. Ma satisfaction is vera acute, an' I may say I——”

“ Is't settled that David's to get the job o' the new store at the pier ? ” she interrupted.

“ It's settled—but it was a close shave. I was jist in time.”

“ Hoo did ye manage it ? Did Maister Murdoch no' think ye had an' unco cheek ringin' his bell last nicht ? ”

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“ Maybe he did, but I wasna heedin’. I jist catched him in time to keep him frae tellin’ his manager to gi’e the job to the Wilkies. He wasna gaun to see me at first, but I sent him word that I was on an errand o’ justice, as it were, an’ at last I seen him. He wasna pleased at me for interferin’, though.”

“ Whit did he say ? ”

“ I said it wud be a roarin’ shame no’ to gi’e the job to David Houston.”

“ An’ whit did *he* say ? ”

“ He speirt if I hadna plenty to dae in ma shop, an’ he rang the bell, dootless to get me pit oot.”

“ Weel ? ”

“ Then, in the strictest confidence, ye ken, I gi’ed him a hint aboot Dobbie’s gemm. (It maun ha’e been some freen o’ Dobbie’s that askit Maister Murdoch to gi’e the job to the Wilkies. It wasna Dobbie hissel’. He’s ower fly for that.)”

“ An’ whit happened then ? ”

“ Oh, then I kent it was a’ richt for David. Efter a few questions to see if I wasna leein’, he offers me a ceegaur, an’ says, rale pleesant like, ‘ I’m gled ye tell’t me in time, Ogilvy. The job’s Houston’s, an’ if I had the use o’ ma legs—he’s lame, puir man—‘ I wud like a kick at that deevil Dobbie ! ’ ”

“ Did he say *deevil* ? ”

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“ Ay, did he, an’ waur nor that. But his hert’s in the richt place, and his jobs for David ’ll no likely end wi’ the new store, I’m thinkin’.”

The grocer could not help looking toward Mrs. Wallace for a sign of approbation.

“ Ye did no’ sae bad,” she said quietly, and smiled.

And he was satisfied.

“ Weel, Maister Ogilvy,” she said after some further conversation, “ I’ll awa’ to Hazel Cottage, for I’m kin’ o’ anxious aboot Jess. She’s no’ as weel as she ocht to be. She’s never got ower that nicht when David gaed into the sea efter the Wulkie lads. Her speerits is ower changeable—up and doon, wi’oot ony guid reason.”

“ I’m vexed aboot that. Wull she no’ ha’e the doctor ? . . . She winna ? That’s a peety. I ken David was troubled the last time I had a crack wi’ him, but he didna tell me. Wull she no’ tak’ a tonic, as it were ? ”

“ Weel, ye see, Maister Ogilvy, I didna want to frichten the lass aboot hersel’, an’ I’ve never said to her I thocht she wisna lukin’ weel. But I doot somethin’ ’ll ha’e to be done if she disna get better quick. She’ll no’ tak’ care o’ hersel’. She works aboot the hoose like a powny, an’ then wee Katie’s needin’ her mair every day—I’m jist gaun alang to haud the wean for a while—an’ she disna sleep weel at nicht. She’s aye

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waukenin' up an' wantin' to dae things. David, puir lad, tell't me that the ither nicht, or early in the mornin', he waukened an' missed her, an' he got up and gaed to the parlour, an' there she wis—workin' at his books . . . I never seen a man as vexed as David. An' he disna want to frichten her either."

"That's terrible!" said Mr. Ogilvy sympathetically. "She maun be made to tak' care o' hersel'. Does she no understaun' hoo weel her man's daein'? Ye sud tell her aboot the store. I wasna gaun to tell David, for he'll likely get the offeecial intimation the morn. But guid news is better nor meddicine, ye ken. Tell her, Mistress Wallace."

"I'll dae that. But Jess has a great notion in her young heid—I'll tell ye aboot it some day—an' she canna help strivin' for it. . . . Weel, guid-day to ye, Maister Ogilvy, an' see an' send us some extra nice ham for Friday nicht."

"I'll dae that. Be shair an' tell her aboot Maister Murdoch speakin' aboot ither jobs forbye the store, but dinna let on I had onythin' to dae wi' the business."

Left to himself, Mr. Ogilvy paced up and down the floor behind his counter. "Twa customers this efternune—an' what a difference! Samuel Ogilvy!" he moralized, "ye're the lucky yin—gaun to yer tea on Friday! . . . But oh! that

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Miss Perk! Job hissel' wud ha'e cried oot at her impiddence! But I'm vexed I lost ma temper. Loss yer temper, an' ye loss somethin' else—Mistress Wallace never said a truer word. *I've* lost a customer, no' that I'm gaun to greet aboot that, for she was yin o' the girnin' sort, aye complainin' an' never satisfied wi' perfection, an' wantin' credit for auld bashed tins that I've got to fling oot on the shore. . . . An' there's her orders lyin' on the coonter, an' she's no' gaun to tak' them noo. It's a peety I weeghed them oot, but she aye liked to see her groceries weeghed. Oh, me! some leddies is ill to dae wi'! . . . But I'm gaun to ma tea on Friday nicht! That's whaur the siller linin' comes in! 'Deed, ay!"

He gathered the items of Miss Perk's countermanded order together, and made them into one parcel, on which he wrote, "Mrs. Donald, from a friend."

"The goods is sold, an' I refuse to tak' them back," he muttered. "I—I dinna deserve to be peyed for them onyway. Miss Perk was maybe no' as bad as I thocht she was, an' nae doot Mistress Wallace was richt aboot her. . . . An' it's no' for Samuel Ogilvy to think evil o' onybody that's fond o' Jess Houston. . . . An' it's a puir hert that never rejeyses, an' I canna help rejeycin' to think——"

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His meditation was interrupted by the entrance of his message boy.

“Laddie,” he said, “d’ye ken whaur Mistress Donald bides—her wi’ her man awa’ at the hospital?”

“Ay.”

“Aweel, tak’ this paircel, lay it on her doorstep, chap at the door, an’ rin awa’ as hard’s ye can. If she catches ye, I’ll think twice aboot raisin’ yer wages next year. Awa’ wi’ ye!”

* * * * *

To Mrs. Wallace’s great but concealed relief she found her niece in a cheerful humour.

Jess was busy in the kitchen, and in reply to her aunt’s inquiry regarding the whereabouts of the baby, laughed and said:

“Katie’s in the parlour with her nurse.”

“Ye mean David? I thocht he wis extra busy the noo.”

“So he is—just rather too busy. But he’s not in the parlour. Katie has got a new nurse.”

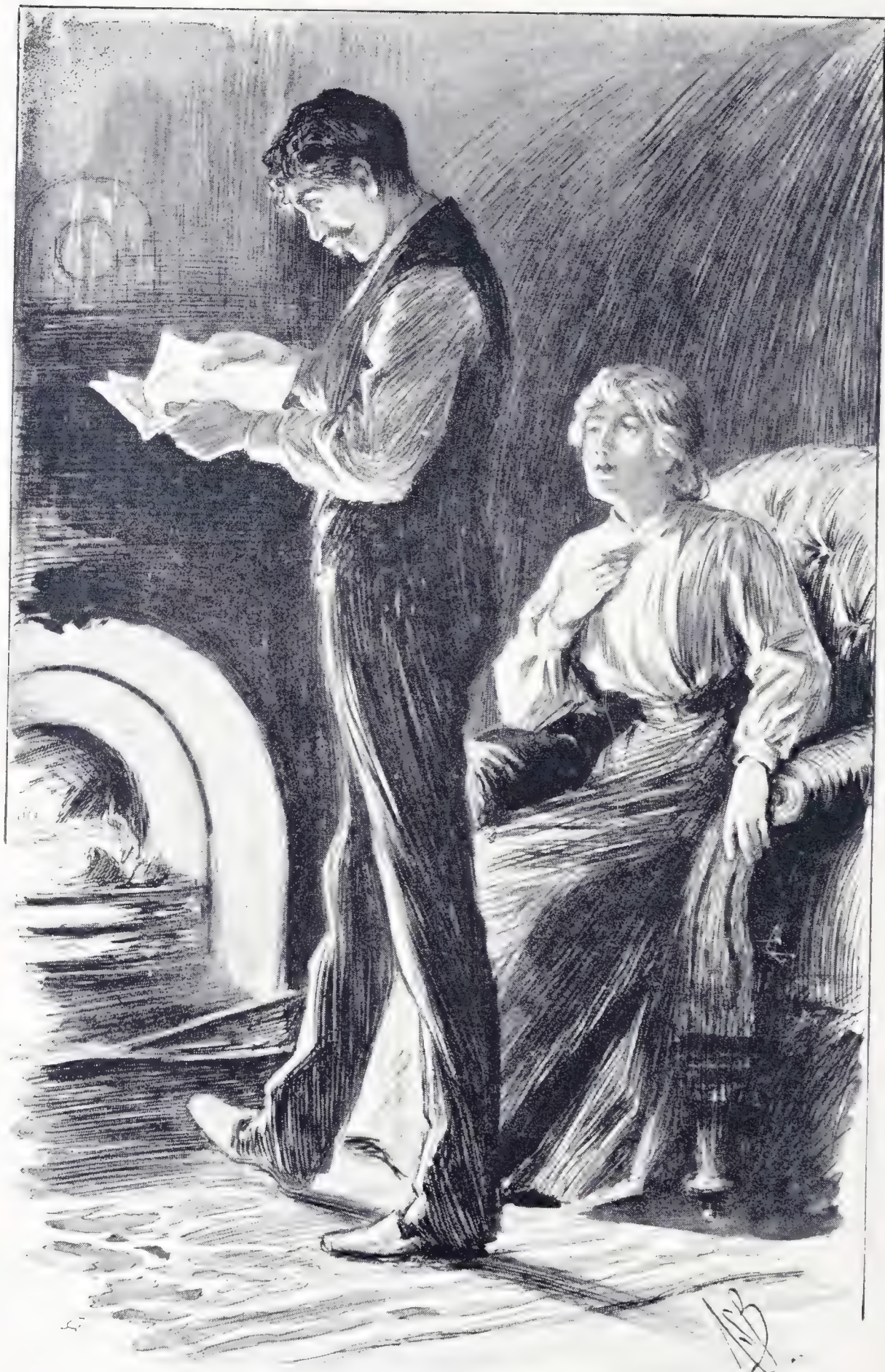
“Wha’s that?” asked Mrs. Wallace, not looking over-pleased.

“Old Angus.”

“Angus! Mercy on us! Ye’re no’ leavin’ the wean to him, Jess, shairly! He’ll no’ ken whit to dae wi’ her.”



“Sitting with Katie on his knees, and telling her queer old stories as if he thought she understood.”—PAGE 237



“Oh wife! whaur did this come frae? five—ten, twenty.....
a hun’ner pound!”—PAGE 253

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“ Oh, but he does. He’s been coming for the last few days and sitting with Katie on his knees, and telling her queer old stories as if he thought she understood. I wasn’t quite sure of him at first, but if you saw him with her for half a minute you would say he was a born nurse.”

“ I’ll see for masel’,” muttered Mrs. Wallace. “ Ye sud be mair carefu’ aboot the wean,” she added sternly, as she hurried from the kitchen.

But she returned ere long, the severity gone from her countenance. “ For a man, espaycially a single man, he’s no’ bad,” she admitted. “ But efter the impiddence he gi’ed me aboot haudin’ a wean, yin day when you an’ David were awa’, I wis feart Katie wud come to hairm. I wunner when he learnt to nurse.”

“ He told David he used to carry his wee sister when he was a boy,” said Jess gently. “ And you know he took care of her until she died this year.”

“ Ay, ay. Puir auld Angus ! It’s mony a year since *he* wis a laddie. . . . Weel, Jess, an’ hoo’s things gaun wi’ ye ? ”

“ All right, Aunt Wallace.”

“ Is yer man daein’ his duty an’ peyin’ attention to his business ? ”

“ David always does that,” said Jess, a trifle haughtily.

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“An’ whit aboot the future—the future ye’re aye thinkin’ about, ma dear?” asked Mrs. Wallace, with unusual tenderness in her voice as she laid her hand on her niece’s somewhat thin arm.

“Oh!” cried the young woman softly, “If—if I could only be sure!”

“Are ye still faur awa’ frae whit ye want, Jess?”

“No, no. But I’m so frightened something will happen to spoil everything just at the very last. If I could only be certain of a little more, I would be able to tell Davie all about it at the New Year. But I can’t be certain.”

“But I think ye can,” said her aunt quietly.

Jess smiled sadly and shook her head.

“Davie’s doing his best, and I’m trying to do mine, but it would take something big in the way of work to make the little more of profit.”

“Jess,” said Mrs. Wallace, “ye’ve never let yersel’ get bate yet.”

“And I don’t mean to get beat,” returned Jess, looking up with a defiant laugh. “But I—I’m a bit stupid now. I make things worse than they are. . . . But I won’t give in!” And she laughed again.

“Weel, my brave lass, I’m gaun to tell ye somethin’ that’ll gar ye lauch wi’oot ony tryin’.

MR. OGILVY HAS CUSTOMERS

Listen to this." And Mrs. Wallace told her little tale of good news forthwith.

But when Jess had heard it all, she sat down on the nearest chair and wept helplessly.

XI

“THERE WAS SADNESS IN KINLOCHAN”

DAVID shook the snow from his coat and cap, and, allowing his wife to take possession of them, followed her into the kitchen.

“What an awful night, David!” she observed.

“Ay; it’s dirty weather,” he returned, standing in front of the fire and wiping the moisture from his face. “Is the Wee Yin sleepin’?”—turning to the cradle.

“Sound. . . . How did you find Angus?” she asked after a pause.

Her husband shook his head. “He’s gey bad. The doctor’s gaun to get somebody to bide wi’ him the nicht. I wud ha’e bided masel’, if it hadna been for—for——” He halted, glanced at his wife, and sighed.

“For me?” said Jess with an attempt at a smile.

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He glanced at her again, but she avoided his eyes, and he turned to the fire once more without speaking, for her white face frightened him.

“There’s a fine fire in the parlour, Davie, and your slippers are toasting on the fender. Away and get warmed. I’ll be after you in a minute.”

“Wud ye no’ like to gang to yer bed, Jess ?” he said, as he moved slowly to the door.

“What ? Bed at half-past seven !”

“I—I thocht maybe ye was wearit.”

“Not a bit of it ! Away you go and have your smoke. I’m coming to talk to you about—about something.”

He stopped at the door. “Mind ! ye’re no’ to touch the books the nicht,” he said seriously.

“All right,” she replied, bending to sweep the perfectly tidy hearth.

For a moment or two he regarded her anxiously, then departed drearily to the little fire-lit sitting-room.

“I maun speak to her ; I maun speak to her,” he said to himself. “She’s whiter every day, an’ she’ll no’ rest hersel’.”

He sat down, like an exhausted man, in the easy chair, and proceeded to unlace his boots, staring miserably the while at the merry fire.

In the kitchen Jess leant against the dresser, endeavouring to gain control over the excitement

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and emotion that quivered and throbbed through her being.

“I ought to be laughing,” she thought, “and I feel more like crying. I’m a stupid thing to be so nervous about telling him. . . . I wonder what he’ll say.”

Now that her part, self-conceived so many months ago and so often mentally rehearsed, was about to be played, she was seized with a tremulous shyness which well-nigh overpowered her. She felt weak too. It was as if she had been climbing up a hard, steep hill for a great reward, and reached the summit too breathless even to gasp “I’ve won!” And the simple romance in her nature demanded that she should make a little story of what might be told in a few quick words.

When at last, after making sure that her baby was slumbering safe and comfortable, she went to join her husband, she entered the parlour more like a culprit than a conqueror.

“Sit here an’ rest ye, Jess,” begged David, rising from the easy-chair, “an’ I’ll licht the lamp.”

“I’m going to sit here,” she returned, taking a high chair in the shadow.

“Ye’re gaun to sit whaur I bid ye, lass,” he rejoined; and stepping forward he picked her up and deposited her in the easy-chair. There

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was something so gentle in the touch of his strong arms that Jess came very near to sobbing out her secret there and then.

But she contrived to laugh and say, "That's where the master comes in, Davie. . . . But don't light the lamp just now," she added, as he was about to put a paper spill to the fire.

"What wey, Jess? D'ye no' think it's cheerier wi' the lamp?"

"I like the fire fine, and—and I'm cheery enough already. Aren't you, Davie?"

He looked down at her. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes very bright. "If ye're cheery, ma dear, it's a' richt, an' I'm cheery alang wi' ye. But I—I wasna cheery a wee while back."

"Oh, but I knew you were vexed about poor Angus, Davie. So was I. You had nothing else to vex you, had you?"

David hesitated before he replied: "I was a wee bit vexed aboot yersel', Jess."

"About me?"

"Ay. Tell me—are ye as weel an' happy noo as ye was a year syne?"

"Of course! Indeed I'm far happier—and I couldn't be that if I wasn't well, could I?"

"Ye're no' as rosy as ye used to be, Jess," he said abruptly.

"Am I not?" she laughed. "Well, after

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to-night, to please you, I'll begin to get rosy again, if I have to use sandpaper. Wait and you'll see! Now sit down and light your pipe and tell me what's to be done about poor Angus. Did you tell him I was coming to see him to-morrow?”

“I did that, an' he was rale pleased, but——”

“But what?”

“Aw, naethin'. He'll be rale pleased to see ye the morn.”

“That's not all he said, Davie. You better tell me the rest.”

“Ye'll no' be offendit wi' the puir buddy? He's auld, ye ken.”

“No, no. I'll not be offended.”

“Weel, he said he wud be prood to see ye, but wud ye please no' bring him ony nourishin' soup.”

“Oh!” Jess smiled; then, becoming grave, said, “But did the doctor not order him to get soup?”

“Ay. But Angus doesna like soup, an' forbye it tak's him a' his time to swallow what he gets frae yer aunt. She's unco guid to him, he says, but he canna tak' mair nor what he's gettin', an' twa-three folk wants to gi'e him soup forbye her. But Jess, lass, he said if it was a' the same to yersel', he wud rayther ye brocht the Wee Yin instead o' soup when ye gaed to see him.”

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“Of course I will,” she said softly. “But Angus isn’t in danger, is he?”

“He needs to be ta’en care o’. But Ogilvy’s gaun to help us to see that he doesna want onythin’. ’Deed, Jess, I whiles think Sam Ogilvy’s the best man I ken.”

“I think he is, Davie. . . . He was telling me to-day he had heard that old John Davidson was thinking of giving up his nursery business.”

For an instant Jess allowed her eyes to rest on her husband’s face.

“Ay; I heard somethin’ aboot that. He wants to sell his place, for he’s gettin’ auld, an’ he had some siller left him a year syne. Some stranger ’ll likely get the place.” The joiner seated himself and produced his pipe, but did not light it. He leaned forward, gazing into the fire.

His wife watched him stealthily, and, after a little, remarked in a casual tone—

“I suppose it’s a fine nursery?”

“It micht be made a fine yin, if the man that had it was keen,” he returned, the least thing moodily.

Jess smiled. “As keen as yourself, Davie?”

David glanced at her and gave a laugh that ended in a sigh. “I doot I’m no’ that keen nooadays, lass.”

“Oh, Davie!” reproachfully.

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Houston sat upright, as if pulling himself together, and fished a match from his waist-coat pocket. As he struck it against the bowl of his pipe Jess bent her head lest he should see her face in the light.

“Ye ken fine I’m no’ that keen,” he said, after he had set his pipe going.

“No, I don’t.”

“Weel, ye’ll ken afore lang, for I tell ye, Jess, the gairden ’ll be a disgrace this year,” he said with sad emphasis—“a disgrace!”

“But you mustn’t forget the flower-shows, Davie.”

“I’m done wi’ shows, I’m done wi’ gairdens, I’m done wi’——”

“No; you’re not!”

“But I am! . . . Oh, ye needna think I’m vext, ma dear. I jist wish I had stoppit the gairdenin’ lang syne. I dae that!”

“Oh!”

“But I’m tellin’ ye the truth.”

“But—but why?”

Without having lit his pipe, David threw the burnt match into the fire. “Because gairdenin’s no’ ma trade,” he said in a low voice, “an’—an’ I had nae business playin’ masel’ when *you*—when *you*——”

“Oh, Davie, lad!” she cried, greatly moved.

“Jess, Jess, ye ken what I mean. I canna

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say it. I'm ashamed before ye. . . .An' I wantit to be a guid man to ye, wife." He bent forward and hid his face in his hands.

For the moment she could not speak, even to try to comfort him, but she leant towards him and laid her hand on his hair.

"Wife?" he said huskily.

"Yes, dear," she whispered.

"Are ye sorry ye mairrit me?"

In the fulness of her emotion she laughed softly—laughed as if she had been asked a question too ridiculous to be answered in words.

His hands came slowly from his face; his eyes regarded her with infinite wonder and affection.

"What kin' o' wumman are ye?" he murmured.

"The proudest and happiest in the world," she said brokenly, and in her turn hid her face.

"Ah, Jess, dinna mak' a joke aboot it," he exclaimed, rising and placing his hands on her shoulders. "Hoo can ye be prood an' happy?"

"Because you've won, Davie!"

"Won! What ha'e I won?"

She was silent awhile, but at last she said gently, still keeping her face from him—

"Sit down, Davie, and I'll try to tell you."

Wondering, he went back to his chair.

She uncovered her face, and twining her fingers in her lap sat gazing into the fire.

“SADNESS IN KINLOCHAN”

“Light your pipe, Davie,” she said, breaking a silence.

David obeyed in a mechanical fashion, glancing at her in a puzzled manner.

Presently she abruptly put the question :

“Are you not tired of being a joiner yet, Davie ? ”

“Eh ? Tired o’ bein’ a jiner ? ” he echoed in amazement. “What d’ye mean, Jess ? ”

“Just what I said.”

“But what wud I be tired o’ ma trade for? Na, na ! I doot ye’re makin’ fun o’ me, ma lass. Maybe *you’re* tired o’ me bein’ a jiner,” he said with a laugh.

“Yes I am.”

“*What ?* ”

“I’m tired of you being a joiner,” said Jess seriously.

Her husband stared at her. “Bless me ! What’ll ye be sayin’ next ? ”

“I’ll be saying I don’t think you should be a joiner any longer. And I say it ! ” she replied quietly.

His face, which had been animated by surprise and curiosity, became gloomy. “Aw, Jess, am I as bad as a’ that ? ” he asked sadly. “I—I thocht I had been daein’ better this wee while back. . . . Jess, ma dear.”

Jess did not reply immediately. Her fingers tightened against each other.

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“ Yes, Davie. But you’ve been neglecting the garden,” she said calmly.

An exclamation burst from her husband’s lips. “ What ails ye, Jess ? ”

“ I want a garden, Davie—a nice garden.”

“ Weel, weel ! ” he cried in despair.

“ I think you should stop being a joiner and be a gardener, Davie.”

He stared at her speechless.

“ Don’t you think so, too ? ” she continued. “ You could give up the shop, and then——”

“ Oh, ma dear,” he sighed, rising in alarm, “ I was shair ye wasna weel. Wull ye no’ gang to yer bed, an’ I—I’ll mak’ ye a nice warm drink ? Come, dearie ; ye’re jist worn oot. Ye’ve been workin’ ower hard, an’ I sudna ha’e let ye. Come.”

Mrs. Houston very nearly broke down in her little part, and narrowly escaped flinging her arms about her husband’s neck and relapsing into incoherency. But with a strong effort she recovered and restrained herself.

“ I’m all right, and I’m quite serious about the parden. Sit down again, Davie ; sit down and tell me exactly what you think.”

Unwillingly he resumed his seat, doing so after reflecting that it might be wise to humour her.

“ What do you think ? ” she asked.

“ Aweel, ma dear, I wud be pleased to dae ony-

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thin’ ye want, but ye maun keep mind that I wudna get muckle pey for workin’ in the gairden,” he said, speaking gently and as pleasantly as possible. “Ye maun keep mind o’ that. An’ I doot”—with a feeble smile—“yersel’ an’ the Wee Yin wudna get fat on floo’ers. Wud ye?”

“But you could sell your flowers, and you could grow and sell plenty of other things as well.”

“The wee gairden wudna grow enough to keep ye in saut an’ sugar.”

“You could get a bigger garden,” she returned in a steady voice. “You could take over Mr. Davidson’s nursery.”

“Ay, dearie,” he said, smiling to conceal his anguish, “I could tak’ ower the nursery fine—if I had the siller. But I’ll ha’e to bide a wee for that.”

“Some one else’ll get the nursery.”

“Ay, nae doot somebody wull. But we’ll no’ heed aboot that, Jess. We’ll jist gang on as we are the noo, an’ I’ll try to gi’e the gairden a tidy up some day shin, an’ mak’ it as braw as I can for the simmer. Noo, ma dear, ye’ll gang to yer bed, an’ Ill——”

“Sit still, Davie,” said his wife; but now her voice was beginning to tremble. “I’ll not move from here till you promise to be a gardener—till you promise to sell the shop and buy the

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nursery. Do you hear that ? ” There was no mistaking her earnestness.

“ Oh, Jess ! ” he muttered helplessly. To think that the old temptation of his secret heart should be set before him by his wife !

“ I believe the Wilkies would buy the shop if you would give them easy terms for payment—are you listening, Davie ?—and I don’t think Mr. Davidson would be hard to deal with,” said Jess, her heart beating violently, her hands quivering.

“ Hoo dae ye ken a’ that, lass ? ”

“ I—I made inquiries.”

David drew a long breath. So it really was her desire that he should make the change.

“ Are you vexed with me for interfering ? ” she inquired nervously.

“ Na, na, ma dear. I can aye trust ye. But o’, Jess, ye’ve been thinkin’ o’ me afore yersel’. D’ye no’ ken the risk a man rins changin’ his trade ? There’s a while afore he gets properly settled in the new trade, an’ I doot I wud ha’e to pey Davison mair nor ever I wud get frae the Wilkies. . . I see what ye’ve been tryin’ to dae for me, ma dear, an I’ll never forget it, but the thing canna be—it canna be.”

“ Oh, yes, Davie,” she said faintly, as she slipped her hand within her blouse. “ I’ve been thinking of myself and Katie as well as you. I’ve found

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out that the nursery would soon bring us more than we've got ; and you've made your business worth buying, and with a little more money you would be quite safe to change.”

“Ay, lass,” said David, wrestling with himself, “ay, lass, I think I micht mak' somethin' oot o' the nursery, but it was you made ma business worth buyin'. . . . But it canna be—it canna be yet, onyway. If we had fifty pound laid by, I wudna be sae feart, but——”

“Give me your hand, Davie,” she whispered.

“Ay, Jess. Are ye for yer bed noo ? . . . Eh ? What's this ?” Something crackled ever so softly.

“Look,” she whispered. “Count them.”

“Oh, wife ! Whaur did this come frae ? Five — ten — fifteen — twinty—twinty-five. . . . God ! *A hunner pound !*”

He sprang to his feet, trembling. “Whaur did it come frae, Jess ?”

“You made it, you made it ! Forgive me not telling you, Davie. I—I wanted to surprise you. I wanted to help a little without letting you know. Don't be angry, lad.” She broke down then—broke down utterly.

“*I made it ?*” stammered David, half stunned by surprise. “*I made a' this money ?*”

“Nearly all of it, Davie, nearly all of it,” she sobbed, as though to excuse herself. “I

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made a—a little of it—just a little. Don't be angry at me for not telling you."

"*Angry?* . . . *Ma dear!*" He dropped on his knees by the side of her chair and sought to wipe away her tears. . . . "Oh, Jess, I aye said ye was a great wumman."

"And you're not vexed with me?" she murmured presently.

"I'm jist vext wi' mase', Jess," he said, sadly, kissing her. "Ma wife's that guid to me I dinna ken what to say. Oh, but I'm gled I'm no' an auld man!"

"I'm glad you're not, Davie," she returned with a tender smile. "But don't be vexed, lad, for you've nothing to be vexed about. You've succeeded, and I—oh, I was never so—so proud and happy in all my life! . . . My dear, guid man," she added as he protested his selfishness in the past, "haud yer tongue, an' dinna haver like a sweetie-wife!"

Her little speech in the vernacular was meant to make him smile, but somehow it touched him almost to tears, and he bowed his face on her breast, bereft of utterance.

Jess lay back in her chair with a sigh of contentment, and laid her arm about his neck. So they remained, scarcely moving, never speaking, while the fire burned lower and lower.

It was not till he felt her arm relax that David



“‘Jess !..... Wife !’ he cried in terror. But Jess neither stirred nor spoke.”—PAGE 255



““Doctor, is it any use?” he asked anxiously.”—PAGE 255

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raised his head to look upon her face and to ask the question which had been the most insistent of the many in his mind.

“Jess, ma dear, wull ye tell me hoo ye managed to mak’— Jess, are ye sleepin’?” he whispered.

A coal fell; a flame flared up, illuminating her face.

“Jess! . . . Wife!” he cried in terror. But Jess neither stirred nor spoke.

* * * *

There was sadness in Kinlochan.

Jess Houston lay ill, and the doctor was puzzled almost to hopelessness. “If Houston were only well off,” he said to himself at last, “I would suggest Matheson.” But it was the joiner himself who first made the suggestion for further medical aid.

At the conclusion of the doctor’s fourth evening visit—he had been calling thrice a day—David went with him through the dusk to the garden gate.

“Doctor,” he said huskily, “I jist wantit to let ye ken I’ve some siller here—a hunner pound.” He produced the notes which he had found on the parlour floor the day following his wife’s seizure. “Doctor, is it ony use?” he asked anxiously.

The doctor cleared his throat. “I was just thinking that you might like Dr. Matheson—

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the most skilful man in such cases—to see Mrs. Houston, and—er—I was sure you would not grudge any fee for his advice. Shall I communicate with him to-night ? ”

“ Ay ; the nicht, doctor, please,” said David eagerly.

“ Very well. . . . No, no ! Keep the money in the meantime. . . . And cheer up, Houston. Don’t mind anything your wife may say, and don’t mention anything in the way of your business, however pleasant. Let her go on thinking you’re a gardener—not a joiner. And her aunt must do the same. It seems to content her. . . . Now I’ll go and wire to the man who’s most certain to help us. Good night.”

The doctor hurried off, and David was on his way back to the cottage when a high voice recalled him to the gate.

“ How is your wife to-night ? ” inquired Miss Perk. “ I was coming to ask, but perhaps you can tell me without my troubling Mrs. Wallace.”

He told her all there was to tell of the doctor’s report, adding that the great specialist was being telegraphed for.

“ I am glad to hear that. It is the right thing to do, but—— ” For once Miss Perk suppressed, nay, strangled in its birth, a question prompted by her curiosity, the question being, “ How

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can you afford it ? ” To her everlasting credit be the strangling of that question, for alas ! the poor lady has been haunted by its ghost ever since.

Before leaving the gate she put other questions of a sympathetic nature, and finally, in softer tones than Houston had ever heard her employ, she said—

“Tell Mrs. Wallace not to let your wife want anything. Tell her to let me know if I can be of—of any use whatever.” Strange that Miss Perk should have said “use” when she might have said “assistance” !

David returned to the cottage a little less hopeless, a little less dreary than he had left it.

On an evening a fortnight later Mrs. Wallace stepped into the grocer’s shop, interrupting Mr. Ogilvy in his occupation of pacing up and down behind the counter.

“Ah, Mistress Wallace, I’m rale gled to see ye,” he said, his sad, wearied eyes brightening. “Is there ony word ? ”

“Ay. I jist cam’ in for a meenit to tell ye that David got a letter the nicht frae the nurse. Her an’ Jess arrived a’ richt, an’ Jess is nane the waur o’ the journey.”

“That’s guid news ! David ’ll be unco pleased.”

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“’Deed, ay. The puir lad’s thenkfu’ for the least cheery word the noo. It’s a sad time for us a’. . . . An’ puir auld Angus is awa’,” sighed Mrs. Wallace.

“Early this mornin’,” said Mr. Ogilvy in a low voice, carefully examining the point of his pencil.

“He sudna ha’e been oot thon day.”

“Ah, but he wud get up an’ gang to see Jess afore she gaed on the boat. He sent Mistress Munro oot a message, sayin’ he was gaun to ha’e a bit nap, an’ he maun ha’e rose an’ pit on his claes whenever her back was turned. I got an awfu’ fricht when I seen him comin’ doon to the pier, mair like a ghost nor a man, but no’ unhappy-like—no’ unhappy-like. But oh, Mistress Wallace, the wey he smiled when he seen Jess ! It wasna like an auld wearit man ava’. . . . Puir auld Angus.”

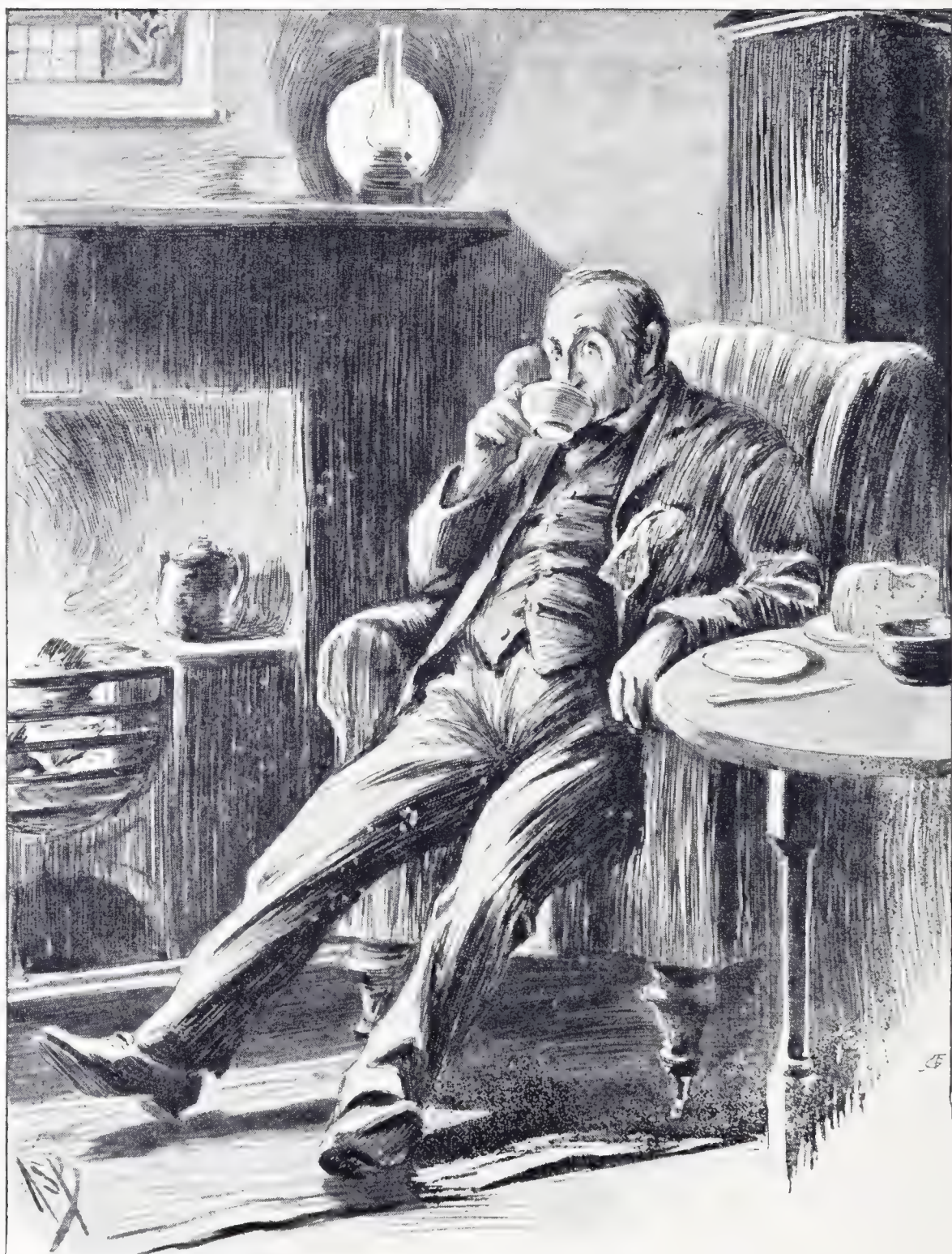
“It wis yersel’ got him hame, wis it no’ ? ”

“Ay. He had a wee rest in the shop, an’ then I got Geordie to yoke the horse, for he was gey faur through. At first I was angry at him, but I hadna the hert to scold him. He was aye lukin’ up in ma face an’ sayin’, ‘It’s fine for you, Ogilvy ; ye’ll see her when she comes hame.’ ”

“He wis rale ta’en up wi’ Jess,” Mrs. Wallace gently observed. “She wis aye kind to him. . . . Eh ! but I wish the lass wis hame again ! ”



“He wud get up an’ gang to see Jess afore she gaed on the boat.”—PAGE 258



“He drank his tea slowly and thought much.”—PAGE 263

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“Angus left me a message for her,” said the grocer, “but I had to promise no’ to gi’e it to onybody but hersel’, an’ I wasna to say what it was about either. Hoo lang d’ye think she’ll be awa’ ? ”

“Three month, the doctor said. But oh ! Maister Ogilvy, dae ye think she’ll get better in a strange place, never seein’ her man nor her wean ? ” she cried appealingly. “I whiles think we sud never ha’e let them tak’ her awa’, an’ I’m feart they’ll no’ treat her weel. I’m no’ haudin’ wi’ thae new-fashioned notions.”

“Aw, ye mauna let yersel’ be cast doon, Mistress Wallace,” he replied with far more cheerfulness than he felt. “The doctors ken mair nor you an’ me, an’ we maun jist boo to their shuperior scienteefic judgment, as it were. Ye’ll see Jess when the time comes, but maybe ye’ll no’ ken her—she’ll be that weel an’ strong. ’Deed, ay. Fine ye ken Jess wud never tak’ the richt kin’ o’ rest in her ain hoose. The vera sicht o’ fameeliar objec’s, so to speak, wud mak’ her restless. An’ thon’s a fine nurse she’s got wi’ her.”

“Mphm. I’ve naethin’ to say agin the nurse, though I got mair impiddence frae her in ten meenits nor I’ve listened to in a’ ma born days. Ma certy ! I wis jist like a bit o’ dirt i’ the hoose when she wis there. I daurna tak’ a

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keek at Jess wi'oot the nurse's permeesion. An' when Jess's mither cam' to see her, she wis treatit the same wey. But I'll say this for the nurse—she wis aye tidy an' clean an' cheery. An' David wis like her servant frae the day she cam' inside the door. But whiles I cud ha'e gi'ed her a guid warm skelpin' when she gi'ed me orders—an' me auld enough to be her mither ! ”

“ Aw, she wasna as young as a' that, Mistress Wallace,” said Mr. Ogilvy bashfully.

“ I beg yer paurdon ? ”

“ Oh, naethin',” he replied hurriedly. “ But does Jess like her ? ”

“ I'll no' say she disna. But I doot she'll no' be able to keep Jess frae wearyin'.”

“ Maybe she'll keep Jess frae worryin',” said the grocer more hopefully, “ an' that's the chief thing.”

Mrs. Wallace shook her head. “ Jess kens ower weel whit she's costin' her man, an' I'm feart she'll be broodin' ower him no' gettin' the nursery. It's unco sair on her, puir lass, efter she had made up her mind it wis a' richt.”

“ An' she wrocht that hard for it,” Mr. Ogilvy remarked with a sigh. “ Can ye no' persuade David to tak' the len' o' the siller frae me ? As I said to him, he can pey interest if he's ower prood to dae itherwise.”

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“Na ; it’s nae use. David winna tak’ yer siller, Maister Ogilvy ; no’ but whit he’s obleeged to ye for the offer. He says he’ll jist stick to the jinerin’. I wis vexed for him the ither nicht when he fun’ oot that Jess had been gettin’ wark frae her auld maister in the toon——”

“Oh me ! To think o’ that ! ”

“I never kent onythin’ about it, but she’s been workin’ at mair books not her man’s. Hauf the siller she gi’ed David the nicht she fentit cam’ frae her auld maister. I wis vexed for David. I’m no’ jist shair if Jess wis richt to keep everythin’ back frae him. Whit dae ye think yersel’, Maister Ogilvy ? ”

The grocer hesitated.

“Mind ! ye’re no’ to think I’m blamin’ Jess, the puir lass, for she intendit it a’ for the best, but dae ye think it wis *wice* o’ her ? ”

When asked for an opinion Mr. Ogilvy could not, as a rule, refrain from giving the same in lofty style.

“Mistress Wallace,” he said solemnly, “ye ask a question which is an’ exceedin’ deeficult yin, inasmuch as I’ve nae experience in the maitter involved, never ha’ein’ tastit o’ the joys o’ matrimony, as it were. But I may say——”

“Tits ! ”

“Aweel, I—I was gaun to say that I think it’s ower shin to say whether Mistress Houston was *wice* or no’.”

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“ My ! ” exclaimed the other in a pitying tone, “ ye’re whiles an unco blether, Maister Ogilvy. ‘ Never tastit o’ the joys o’ matrimony ’—did ye no’ ? ”

“ Weel—a—it’s no’ ma fau’t,” he stammered feebly, endeavouring to raise his eyes to her face, but failing utterly.

“ Ha’e ye ony nice ham the day ? ” inquired Mrs. Wallace abruptly.

“ Ham ? ” he echoed in confusion.

“ Shairly ye ken whit ham is ! ”

“ Ham—oh, ay. I’ve plenty ham.”

“ Is’t guid ? ”

“ Ay, it’s guid,” he replied without enthusiasm. He was altogether depressed.

“ I’ll tak’ hauf-a-pun, if ye please.”

He cut and weighed the ham in silence, while Mrs. Wallace watched him, not unkindly.

“ Maister Ogilvy,” she said on receiving the small parcel, “ ye’re a tired man. Shut yer shop and gang to yer bed. Ye wasna there last nicht, I suppose.”

“ Aw, it’s no’ the flesh that’s wearit, Mistress Wallace,” he returned sadly.

“ Maybe it’s the banes,” she retorted cruelly ; but the next moment she said in an altered voice, “ I ken fine ye’re vext aboot mony things; Maister Ogilvy, an’ I’m vext masel’. But we mauna despair. In a wee while we’ll ha’e Jess an’ David

“SADNESS IN KINLOCHAN”

thegither again—I’m shair we wull, an’ that’ll mak’ up for a lot. Wull it no’ ? ”

His face cleared. “It wull that ! ” he said heartily. “An’ maybe Jess’ll get a’ she wants yet, and David ’ll forget a’ his troubles, though they’re mony an’ black the noo.”

“That’s the wey to talk ! ” she cried, with an attempt at a laugh. “I wis needin’ to hear somethin’ like that, for I’m gaun back to David noo.”

“An’ ye’ve made me feel better, Mistress Wallace. Ye’ve dispelled ma superabundant gloom, as it were. In fac’, I’m gaun to hope for the best—the vera best ! ”

“An’ I’ll dae the same,” said Mrs. Wallace, holding out her hand.

“Guid-nicht to ye, Mistress Wallace. . . . We—we’ll hope thegither.”

After her departure Mr. Ogilvy had several customers, and, having served the last of them, he put up the shutters, locked the door, put out the lamps, and retired to the back room, where he brewed himself a cup of tea.

“She was richt,” he said to himself ; “I’m a tired man. . . . But I’m no’ done for yet.” And he drank his tea slowly, and thought much. His last thought before going to bed was of old Angus, who the previous night had handed him a small tin box containing a number of greasy one-

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pound notes, several half-sovereigns and a small handful of silver, together with a piece of paper laboriously inscribed with the following :—

“ I leav to Mrs. Houston, wife of
David Houston, joiner, Kinlochan,
15 ponds—With thanks,
Angus Fraser.”

“ Fifteen pound,” sighed the grocer, as he closed his eyes. “ Puir Angus ! he did his best. He’ll rest happy. . . . *His* bit siller ’ll no’ be refused ! ”

He sighed again, and was on the verge of falling asleep when a mouse began to gnaw in the far corner of the room. The sound was nothing new to him, but on this occasion he found it peculiarly irritating, and after flinging both his shoes into the corner and emitting several expressions of which he was ashamed, all in vain, he realized that he was wide awake, and became almost as restless as the mouse.

Miserable, he sat up in bed and felt for his pipe and matches. But he never drew them from the pocket of his jacket, for at the moment of contact between his fingers and his pipe a wonderful idea struck him—not that it came from the pipe. Indeed, to this day he tells himself that it came from the mouse, though, as a matter of fact, were he to discuss the matter—which he would not—

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with the greatest of mental philosophers, the greatest of mental philosophers would probably refer him to the greatest of mental physicians. But perhaps Mr. Ogilvy thinks of the mouse that assisted the entangled lion.

At any rate, what happened was this. The grocer sat motionless for nigh a minute. Then he drew that which was perhaps the longest breath of his life. Then he raised his right hand above his head, and brought it down with a sounding *thwack* upon his leg, and in a jubilant burst addressed himself in these words :—

“ Samuel Ogilvy, ye’re a genius ! ”

XII

HOME AGAIN

“**D**AVID was lukin’ like a new man when he gaed on board the boat the day,” remarked Mr. Ogilvy, who, having shut his shop an hour earlier than usual, had dropped in at Hazel Cottage to discuss the happy event of the morrow with its temporary mistress.

“It wud be a peety if he had lukit like an auld yin when he wis gaun aff to bring hame his wife efter never seein’ her for near three month,” returned Mrs. Wallace, pausing in the act of dusting the parlour mantelpiece. “I daursay ye wud ha’e a crack wi’ him,” she continued, “for he left here faur ower shin for the boat—no’ but whit I wis gled to see him oot the house, for he wis dancin’ aboot like a hen on a het girdle since the time he got up i’ the mornin’, puir man.”

“He appeared to be in a high-strung con-

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dection, as it were, when I seen him,” said the grocer, “but, as ye say, it wud be a peety if he wasna upliftit wi’ the exceedin’ joyous prospec’ o’ the morn. He was tellin’ me him an’ the guidwife wud arrive aboot fower o’clock.”

“Ay. An’ it’ll tak’ me a’ ma time to be ready for them,” muttered Mrs. Wallace, resuming her dusting with much vigour.

“I—I hope I’m no’ in yer road, Mistress Wallace,” Mr. Ogilvy said from the easy-chair, as the duster came near to flapping in his face.

“Ay, ye’re in ma road. Awa’, an’ tak’ a sate on the sofa. Ye had nae business sittin’ doon in the easy-chair an’ crumplin’ the braw tidy wi’ your big silly heid. A man’s waur nor a dizzen weans when a buddy’s wantin’ to mak’ things nate.”

“I’m shair I’m vexed to ha’e incommodit ye to sic a serious extent,” he said a little sulkily, as he took the seat indicated.

“Man, man, ye needna be that easy offendit,” she retorted pleasantly. “Gang on wi’ yer crack.”

“Weel,” he said, quickly recovering his good-humour, “weel, Mistress Wallace, what wud ye say if I tell’t ye I had been struck by an idea?”

“I wud say ye sud be thenkfu’ ye hadna been struck by onythin’ harder.” Mrs. Wallace chuckled, and began to polish the front of the mantel-

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piece as if she desired to remove the paint.

“Whit wis the idear, Maister Ogilvy?”

“Maybe ye’ll no’ approve o’ ’t.”

“That’s likely; but tell us aboot it.”

“Weel, I was thinkin’ it micht be a gratifyin’ thing to the freens o’ David an’ Jess if I was to organize a deputation o’ welcome to be at the pier on——”

“Organize yer Auntie Kate!” cried Mrs. Wallace.

“I was feart ye wudna approve,” he said with a sigh. “But I thocht it wud——”

“Na, na. I ken ye meant weel, Maister Ogilvy, but ma advice to you is to let Jess an’ her man get aff the boat wi’oot ony——”

“Demonstration, Mistress Wallace?”

“Hullabaloo, an’ let them get hame as quick an’ as quate as they can. If ye like, ye can organize yersel’ to luk efter the boax an’ ony paircels Jess brings wi’ her, an’ see that they’re brocht here wi’oot delay.”

“’Deed, I’ll dae that wi’ the utmaist plee-sure,” said Mr. Ogilvy, brightening. “I’ll bring them masel’, for I want to get a word wi’ Mistress Houston as shin as possible. I daursay ye’re richt aboot ha’ein’ nae demonstration, Mistress Wallace. Efter a’, it micht prove a complete fisco, so to speak.”

“A whit?”

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“ A fisco—a failure, Mistress Wallace.”

“ Aw, ye’ve been at yer detective stories again ! I wish ye wud speak words that dacent folk can unnerstaun.”

“ I read the word in a bookie ca’ed *Fashionable Society*, that a leddy left in the shop the ither day, an’ it struck me as a word fu’ o’ meanin’,” said Mr. Ogilvy with dignity. “ I see nae reason why I sudna improve ma mind when I get the chance, Mistress Wallace.”

“ Neither dae I,” she returned drily. “ May ye get plenty chances, is a’ I can say, an’ no’ end wi’ bein’ a fisco, as ye ca’ it.”

Mr. Ogilvy sighed. “ Ye’re awfu’ severe on a man, Mistress Wallace,” he said despondently. “ If ye kent hoo deeply I deplore ma insufficiency, an’ hoo sairly I feel yer—yer——”

“ Ye micht step ben to the kitchen, Maister Ogilvy, an’ see if Katie’s sleepin’, an’ bring me the wee brush that ye’ll fin’ in the middle drawer o’ the dresser.”

“ I’ll dae that,” he said rising. “ There’s no’ mony things I wudna dae for ye,” he stammered from the doorway.

“ An’ ye micht pit a bit coal on the kitchen fire when ye’re at it. See an’ no’ mak’ a noise.”

“ I’ll endeavour to create as little disturbance as possible, Mistress Wallace,” he said solemnly,

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lingering in the doorway, as if making up his mind to say more.

“ I’m waitin’ on the brush,” said Mrs. Wallace, breaking an oppressive silence.

The grocer disappeared. “ Samuel Ogilvy,” he said to himself, “ if it wasna that ye kep’ a grocer’s shop, ye wud be faur better dumb ! ”

On his returning with the information and the article she required, Mrs. Wallace thanked him briefly and motioned him to the sofa. Then before he found time to make any remark, had he desired to do so, she abruptly put the question—

“ D’ye think I can keep a secret, Maister Ogilvy ? ”

“ A secret ? ” he exclaimed, surprised. “ What kin’ o’ a secret ? ”

“ Never heed. But I’m speirin’ if ye think *I* can keep a secret ? ”

The grocer scratched his nose thoughtfully. “ It’s a queer-like question. Ha’e ye gotten a secret, Mistress Wallace ? ”

“ Dizzens ! But I want anither yin ! Dae ye think I can keep it, or dae ye believe the sayin’ that a wumman canna keep a secret ? ”

“ Some sayin’s is open to improvement,” he returned slowly. “ No’ bein’ a connoozier, as it were, o’ female natures, I canna venture to gi’e ye a fixed an’ definite opeenion, but——”

“ I’m no’ heedin’ about yer opeenion—I want

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yer answer to ma first question. Dae ye think I can keep——”

“Ay, Mistress Wallace. I ha’e nae hesitation in replyin’ to yer query in the affirmative.”

“I think ye’ve had plenty hesitation, but I’m gled ye think I can keep a secret, for I want ye to tell me yer ain.”

“Mines !” he cried, taken aback, his countenance reddening deeply.

“Ay,” said Mrs. Wallace, smiling kindly. “Yer ain secret. But ye needna be in a hurry, for I see ye’re a bit pit about at me guessin’ the truth. I’ll jist gang on wi’ ma wark till ye’re ready to tell me.” And she fell to with the brush.

A prey to conflicting emotions, the grocer sat bolt upright on the sofa, staring in front of him, but seeing nothing. “Samuel Ogilvy,” he said to himself, “she’s gaun to gi’e ye yer chance at last ! Speak oot, man, an’ lay yer secret bare. . . . Oh, me ! What’ll I say ?”

He cleared his throat several times, wiped his brow, moistened his lips, and after a vain attempt or two at speech said huskily—

“Mistress—Mistress Wallace.”

“Weel, Maister Ogilvy ?”—encouragingly.

Once more he coughed and moistened his lips.

“Mistress Wallace,” he began in nervous tones, “in regaird to the—the state o’ ma affec-

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tions—I micht say ma humble but sincere affections—I mean the affections o’ ma secret hert respectin’ yer——”

Mrs. Wallace let her brush fall with a clatter on the fender. “Did ye hear Katie cryin’ the noo?” she asked, and without waiting for a reply from Mr. Ogilvy, who would probably have been unable to make one, she hurried from the room.

She was absent five minutes, and on her return Mr. Ogilvy, having in the interval called himself a number of uncomplimentary names, was almost recovered. Her first words, however, threw him once more into an excited condition.

“Weel, Maister Ogilvy,” she said cheerfully, “ye wis gaun to tell me aboot the siller auld Angus left to Jess. Katie’s a’ richt, so ye can gang on wi’ the story.”

“Eh?” he cried stupidly.

“Tits, man!” she returned, looking up from her work and chuckling, “ye needna mak’ a secret o’ it ony langer—to me, onyway.”

“But—but I promised Angus no’ to tell onybody but Jess. She’ll likely tell ye hersel’ a’ aboot it the morn, Mistress Wallace.”

“But I want to ken the nicht. I thocht ye said ye trustit me, Maister Ogilvy.”

“I did that, an’ I’ll say it again, Mistress Wallace, if ye like; but this is a secret I canna

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tell ye. Hoo did ye ken Angus Fraser had left a bit siller to yer niece ? ” he asked suddenly.

“ Jist because he tell’t me,” she replied, turning and facing him. “ The puir man tell’t me twa-three days afore he dee’d, an’ he askit me to tak’ chairge o’ ’t, seein’ I wis the lass’s auntie, but I tell’t him to gi’e it to yersel’, for I ha’e nae place in ma hoose for keepin’ ither folk’s siller. So, ye see, Maister Ogilvy, it wisna a’ yer ain secret efter a’.”

“ So it seems,” he admitted nervously.

“ An’ a’ I want to ken is hoo muckle siller he left her. It’s no’ jist curiosity, for I’ve a wee bit siller o’ ma ain, an’—an’ I’m fond o’ Jess.”

The grocer sat looking at his feet, his hands spread on his knees.

Mrs. Wallace broke the silence. “ It’ll hurt naebody to tell me,” she said persuasively.

“ Ye—ye’re a kind wumman, Mistress Wallace. . . . But did Angus no’ tell ye the — the amount ? ”

“ Ay. He had it in a wee boax, an’——”

“ Ye seen it ? ” Mr. Ogilvy gasped, and gripped his knees.

She nodded. “ An’ he said he thocht he wud be able to add somethin’ mair afore he gaed awa’, puir man. But I doot he didna manage that. . . . Still, I wud like to ken if——”

The anxiety had cleared from Mr. Ogilvy’s

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face, and he rubbed his hands gently together as he interrupted Mrs. Wallace—

“’Deed, ay! He wud add somethin’ efter ye seen the boax, nae doot, an’ afore he gi’ed it to me. Ye can coont on that, Mistress Wallace,” he went on rapidly. “Ye see, Angus was rale economical efter his sister dee’d, an’ he maun ha’e saved faur mair siller nor onybody had a notion o’. Ay! In fac’ I wudna wonder if ye was surprised at the siller he left!”

“There wis fifteen pound in the boax when I seen it,” she said, “an I thocht that wis big savin’s for puir auld Angus.”

Mr. Ogilvy burst into a loud laugh that startled himself as well as his hostess.

Mrs. Wallace stared at him.

“I beg yer paurdon,” he said after a short pause, “but did ye—did ye coont the siller in the boax?”

“I did, for Angus askit me to coont it.”

Again the grocer laughed loudly and also rather wildly. “Fifteen pound!” he cried. “I doot Angus was ha’ein’ a joke wi’ ye. Fifteen pound! It bates a’! I—I wonder whaur the ither hunner pound was that day.”

“The whit?” shouted Mrs. Wallace.

“The ither hunner pound. The siller in the boax is a hunner an’ fifteen pound, neither mair nor less,” returned the grocer, his voice beginning

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loud and ending faint. He leaned back on the arm of the sofa and shook with laughter.

"Say it again," she cried, coming across the floor to him.

But he could not just then. Mr. Ogilvy was suffering from a mild attack of hysteria.

For nearly a minute Mrs. Wallace regarded him inquiringly, and when she spoke her voice was well under control.

"Ye're no' deceivin' me, are ye?" she said quietly.

"Deceivin' ye!" He started, and became grave. "Dae ye—dae ye no' believe ma word?" He wished he could meet her gaze. "Dae ye no' believe that there's a—a hunner an' fifteen pound in the boax waitin' for Mistress Houston comin' hame the morn? Wull I gang to the shop an' bring back the boax for ye to see?"

"Na, na. Ye needna dae that," she replied after some little hesitation. "I'll tak' yer word for 't, Maister Ogilvy. But I canna understaun whaur puir Angus got a' the siller."

"Weel," said the grocer, recovering himself, "we maun jist regaird that as yin o' thae mysterious occurrences that—that occasionally occurs to baffle the highest intelligence, as it were. An' efter a', it was puir auld Angus's business, an' neither yours nor mines, Mistress Wallace. Is

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that no' the case ? ” He ventured to glance at her, but she seemed wrapt in thought.

“ Moreover,” he went on, gaining confidence, “ whatever wey Angus cam' by the siller, he cam' by it honest-like. I'll sweer to that ! An'—an', oh ! Mistress Wallace, conseeder what it'll mean to yer niece ! The vera thocht o' that sud gar ye feel like a—a young lion—or, mair correc'ly, like a young lioness ! Does it no' ? ”

Mrs. Wallace turned her back on him, and went to the window, where she stood looking out on the calm, dusky loch.

“ It gars me feel,” she murmured, “ like an auld wife that's leaved to see her dearest get her reward. . . . Maister Ogilvy, ye can obleege me by takin' the brush frae the fender an' pittin' it whaur ye got it in the kitchen dresser. An' say nae mair aboot the siller, man, for—I—I canna thole the mention o' 't the noo.”

“ Aw, Mistress Wallace ! ” he sighed.

“ Tak' the brush to the kitchen ! ” she snapped.

He crossed the room and picked up the brush—and threw it down again.

“ Mistress Wallace,” he cried excitedly, “ yer brush can lie there till the last trumpet for a' I care, for I tell ye I'm no' gaun to be treatit like as if I was a—a servile reptile ! ”

To his intense astonishment she paid no attention whatever to his outburst, but continued looking out of the window.

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Stupidly he stood, gazing at her.

Suddenly he heard a faint sound and saw her hands go up quickly to her face.

“Oh, me!” he whispered to himself, awe-stricken, “she—she’s cryin’.”

He took a step towards her, checked himself, turned, picked up the brush, and stole noiselessly to the kitchen. “Samuel Ogilvy,” he muttered, “ye best gang stracht hame an’ pit yer ugly heid in yer stootest broon-paper poke, for ye’re the maist meeserable specimen o’ the human race—nae guid to onybody an’ nae guid to yersel’!”

There was a slate and pencil lying on the dresser, and he picked up the latter and wrote—

“Good night. Beg pardon. Will attend to esteemed orders to-morrow. Beg pardon.—S. OGILVY.”

He placed the slate where she would see it on entering the kitchen, and departed quietly by the back door.

But as he passed round the front of the cottage Mrs. Wallace tapped on the window and threw it open.

“Maister Ogilvy!”

He halted, and was relieved to see her countenance wearing its usual expression.

“Ay, Mistress Wallace?” he replied awkwardly.



“Will attend to esteemed order to-morrow.”—PAGE 278



“I maun say, Maister Ogilvy, that ye’ve been an unco’ guid
freen to ma Jess an’ her man.”—PAGE 280

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“Ye’ll be at the pier the morn ?”

“Certainly.”

“I’ll bide here wi’ Katie an’ ha’e the tea ready. An’—an’, Maister Ogilvy.”

“Weel, Mistress Wallace ?”

“Davie’s shair to get the nursery noo ?”

“Shair ! At least, Jess’ll ha’e the siller.”

“Ay. But there’s nae fear o’ it bein’ ower late ? There’s nae fear o’ Maister Davison ha’ein’ sell’t it to anither pairty ?”

“Na, na. I seen aboot that. Ye see, when I kent aboot the legacy, as it were, I jist gaed an’ had a bit crack wi’ Davison an’ tell’t him he wasna to pairt wi’ his nursery for three month an’ he wasna to ask ony questions.”

“My ! ye’ve a neck on ye !” exclaimed Mrs. Wallace admiringly. “Whit did he say ?”

“He tell’t me to gang awa’ an’ droon masel’. But I said I wud prefer to wait an’ see him hanged. An’ efter a wheen mair compliments o’ the same nature, we cam’ to business. I gi’ed him ma bill at three month.”

“Ye mean ye’ve bocht his place ?”

“Weel,” said the grocer, smiling, “I’ll ha’e to tak’ it, if Davie doesna. So dinna gang an’ advise Jess to pit her siller in the bank. I’ve a grocer’s shop to keep, an’ that’s bad enough wi’oot ha’ein’ a white elephant as weel.”

“A whit ?”

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“A white elephant, Mistress Wallace. It’s a feegure o’ speech, ye ken, meanin——”

“I thocht it wis a beast. But never heed the meanin’. I maun say, Maister Ogilvy, that ye’ve been an unco guid freen to ma Jess an’ her man. But I doot when they hear whit ye’ve done for them, they’ll——”

“Whisht, Mistress Wallace! Ye—ye maun keep that secret. Oh, ye maun keep that secret!” he implored.

“It’ll come oot whether I tell them or no,” she said. “But I’ll no’ tell.”

“Thenk ye, thenk ye,” he returned gratefully. “Noo, the hale show’s gaun to turn oot fine! The Wilkie lads ’ll be makin’ David an offer for the business as shin as they get the chance,” he went on jubilantly, “an’ then it’ll a’ gang merry like a mairriage bell, as the poet says.” Here Mr. Ogilvy became red and confused. “It’ll be a’ richt, onywey,” he supplemented hurriedly.

“’Deed, ay!” murmured Mrs. Wallace softly. “An’ d’ye ken, Maister Ogilvy, anither thing that’s pleased me fine the day? I heard Maister Dobbie wisna comin’ to Kinlochan ony mair.”

“An’ it’s true! There’s anither man comes in his place noo to inspec’ the hooses. Dobbie couldna thole Tousie Tam aye meetin’ him at the boat an’ rinnin’ efter him near a’ day, an’ seein’ him on to the boat again, an’ for ever

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speirin' the rent. Tam had a rhyme, ye ken, about—

Haw, Maister Dobbie,
Wi' yer twa rooms an' lobby!

an' a' the weans took it up, an' cried it efter him."

"Mphm! I've heard it," said Mrs. Wallace chuckling. "An' I've heard forbye that Tam gets a heap o' sweeties at Maister Ogilvy's shop nooadays."

The grocer hung his head. "The warld is fu' o' strange coincidences," he stammered, "an' Kinlochan's nae exception. . . . Weel, it's time I was awa' hame. I'll see ye the morn's efternune when I come wi' the boax an' the paircels."

"Ay. An' I've got ma wark to dae, so I'll bid ye guidnicht, Maister Ogilvy. But bide a meenit. Eh—wis there no' a paper in the boax wi' the siller ye got frae Angus—a kin' o' wull?" she asked.

He started, but controlled himself. "There was a paper, Mistress Wallace, an' nae doot ye'll see it the morn. It'll no' be the same as the yin ye seen yersel', I preshume."

"I didna say I seen ony paper," she returned quietly. "But, as ye say, I'll see it the morn.

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Guidnicht to ye—soon' sleep—an'—an' may ye get yer reward."

She shut the window and watched him as he went down the path.

"A guid man, but a bad leear," she said to herself. "I'll see he gets his money back some-day."

* * * * *

Mr. Ogilvy had prepared a somewhat elaborate speech of welcome, but when Jess Houston and her husband stepped from the gangway it was reduced to "My! I'm rale gled to see ye back. Gang on to the hoose, an' I'll luk efter yer luggage."

It was a dull day, but Jess thought she had never seen Kinlochan looking so lovely, and she told her husband so, as they went along the road after having returned the kindly greetings of many of the village folk.

"Ay; the place is lukin' fine noo," said David gravely. "Oh, wife, I'll be gled to see ye in the hoose again!"

"And I'll be glad to be there, Davie," she answered with a smile and a sigh.

The remainder of the way was passed in silence, for they had discussed many things on the journey, everything, indeed, except the thing which lay like an ache on her heart, and which did not seem to affect him in the least. Only



“Jess thought she had never seen Kinlochan looking so lovely.”—PAGE 282



“‘Ye’re no’ lukin’ that bad, ma lass.’”—PAGE 283

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she appeared to have any bitter recollection of the sweet brief triumph of three months ago. She had been the one to gather up the fragments of the cup—the loving-cup—which had slipped between them ere they had more than sipped its sweetness, while he had been content, or at least resigned, to let them lie as they fell. The regret, the companion of the longing that had been with Jess through the weeks of convalescence, came with her to the very gate of her home.

But there it met with a check.

David pushed open the gate, and put his hand on her arm.

“Are ye happy, Jess?” he whispered.

She looked up at him for an instant and saw his eyes as she had never seen them before. *Happy?* Here was her man; her child and her home were within a few yards of her. Why, woman alive! it was the happiest of all her hours!

He patted her shoulder. “Haste ye to the Wee Yin,” he said, smiling.

Mrs. Wallace met her at the door, kissed her, muttered, “Ye’re no’ lukin’ that bad, ma lass,” and gave her a push in the direction of the kitchen, where a small voice was heard babbling merrily. As Mr. Ogilvy subsequently observed, “There’s no’ anither female in creation but wud ha’e

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spiled the hale show by ha'ein' the wean in her airms at the door. I'll back Mistress Wallace for tact, the Royal Faym'ly no' exceptit. Ay!"

After a discreet delay the grocer arrived from his cart with the box and parcels.

Mr. Ogilvy, who was wearing his tight felt hat in honour of the occasion, was puffing with excitement and heat, but refused to take a seat and wait for a cup of tea.

"I maun flee awa' back to the receipt o' custom, as it were," he explained, "or the simmer veesitors 'll be thinkin' I jist keep a shop for fun—which is a thing naebody but weans an' lunattics wud dae. But I'll see ye shin, I hope, an'—an', Mistress Houston, here's a wee paircel for yersel'—parteeclars within, so to speak. Ye can open it later on. It'll no' spile. An' here twa-three sticks o' baurley sugar for Katie, wi' ma respec's. An'—weel, guid fortune attend ye a'—an' guidbye the noo."

He shook hands heartily with Mr. and Mrs. Houston, looked for a moment as if he would kiss Katie, but lacked the courage, and was going to shake hands with Mrs. Wallace when he noticed that she too was preparing to depart. Jess and David had cordially invited the Aunt to remain, but she had stoutly refused.

"Na, na! Thenk ye a' the same. Ye'll get plenty o' me yet. An', forbye, I'm wearyin'

HOME AGAIN

for ma ain hoose. . . . David Houston," she went on, raising her voice, "did I ever mention to ye that ma coal-cellar door wis wantin' a lock?"

"Ye did, Mistress Wallace," said David, reddening.

Mrs. Wallace chuckled, and held out her hand. "Never heed, Davie. It's the last time I'll speak aboot it. You an' Jess'll come to yer tea the morn's nicht, an' ha'e a crack aboot—ha! ha! ha!—ither maitters. Eh, Maister Ogilvy? Ha! ha!"

The grocer slid to the door. "I wud be pleased to tak' yer paircels in the cairt, Mistress Wallace," he said.

"Thenk ye," she returned, following him.

"You should go in the cart, too, Aunt," put in Jess from the door-step, with her daughter in her arms.

"'Deed, ay!" said David, winking at his wife.

"I—I'll be rale prood," said the grocer bashfully.

Mrs. Wallace looked from one to the other. Her eyes twinkled and she smiled faintly.

"Weel, weel," she said, as she stepped on to the path, "seein' that Maister Ogilvy an' me are gaun the same road, we micht jist as weel gang thegither."

THE END

